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# AROUND AFGHANISTAN

# AROUND AFGHANISTAN

BY

MAJOR DE BOUILLANE DE LACOSTE

WITH A PREFACE BY

M. GEORGES LEYGUES

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

J. G. ANDERSON

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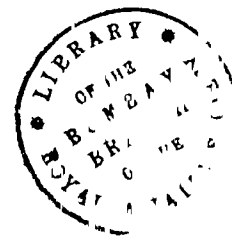


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# PREFACE

## THE ASIATIC PROBLEM

### I

THERE is no nobler passion than the passion for travelling. I mean by this the strong, healthy passion which forces a man away from the comforts of the fireside, causing him to endure every fatigue and to brave every peril, not only that he may come to know the manifold and changing world, may live a new life in the sunshine of distant shores, may taste the intoxication of long voyages, the overwhelming delight of remoteness, the pleasure of lonely hours under new skies, but that he may study and describe strange countries, races, and civilisations, and may try to understand and to solve the great political and social problems which perplex the world.

An Arab, to whom I put the question why Mohammed ordained the Mecca pilgrimage, replied: "In order to compel his sons to visit the holy places, but at the same time in order to take them, at least once in their lives, far from their birth-place. Wanderers are we. A town is to us a prison-house.

"You know the inscription on the front of the caravansary of Abbâs-le-Grand: 'The world is a caravansary and we are the caravan.'

"Travel the world over, listen and observe. This is wisdom's last word."

Major de Lacoste, in virtue of the extent and the

strangeness of the countries he traversed, his physical and moral energy, his fearless inquisitiveness, belongs to the family of explorers. His place is beside Bernier, Tavernier, Chardin, Huc, Gabet, Bonvalot, Henri d'Orléans, Dutreuil de Rhins, Bonin and Grillières. His journey to the forbidden territory was not adventured haphazard. He had already had some experience of Asia on its boundaries, in Indo-China, China, Manchuria and Siberia, before attempting its central mass. His object, as he himself informs us, was to approach that mysterious and alluring country called Afghanistan, to keep as close as he could to its impassable frontier, and, while travelling along it, to look over the wall.

Major de Lacoste accomplished his purpose. Starting from Teheran, April 27, 1906, he reached Meshed, the sacred capital of Persia, beyond the oasis of Korassan. He made his way into Russian Turkestan, and, at Askhabad, joined the Transcaspian railroad. He visited the great commercial, political and religious centres :—

Merv, shut in by its high walls, in the midst of cultivated lands and orchards, and among vast ruins witnessing to its vanished greatness ;

Bokhara, that populous and flourishing city, which points with pride to its four hundred mosques, its hundred and fifty schools, its faculty of Mussulman theology, its thermal baths, its gardens, and its caravansaries, the largest in the world ;

Samarkand, Tamerlane's capital and burial place, a marvellous city, where everything is blue : the sky, the water in the springs, the domes, the minarets, the shadow of the walls, the veils with which the

women are attired, the flowers in the gardens, and the birds ;

Kokand, a town flashing with the sheen of silk, gold, and copper.

On the 20th of June, the Major reached the railway terminus, Andijan. He travelled post through Ferganah, a delightful corner of the high valley of Syr-Daria, and on the 21st he arrived at Osh, whence for the first time he saw, above the snowy heights of L'Alaï, the inaccessible summits on which is supported the " Roof of the World."

There, he was fain to bid adieu to great roads, to get together camp equipment and arms, to requisition ponies and camels, to lay in provisions, to charter guides, and to organise the first caravan.

Reckoning from this point, we can divide the Major's itinerary into six principal stages :—

The regions of snows and great altitudes ; from the Taldick Pass (11,500 feet) to the Beïk Pass (15,000 feet), at which point the three frontiers of Indo-China, Russian Afghanistan, and Russian China meet ; from the valley of Sarikol to the town of Yarkand, by tracks and paths which keep at a height of more than 13,000 feet ; lastly, from the town of Yarkand to that of Leh, the capital of Little Tibet, crossing the mountain chains that separate Kachgarie from Cashmere, by a succession of passes, the lowest of which is at an altitude of 16,000 feet ;

The region of the Himalayas and the High Valleys, by Srinagar, " the Venice of India," a singular town with roofs of flower-beds and with floating gardens ;

The region of rich lowlands, by the valley of the Indus, from Rawal-Pindi to Quetta ;

The desert region of the Baluchistan country, with its endless plains of lava and flint-stone, from Kelat, Mastung, and Nushki to the guard-house of Koh-i-Malek-Siah ;

The region of the fluvial oases of Seïstan, by the shut-in depressions separating Iran from Hindustan, which, every year, are inundated by the rising of the large rivers ;

The region of the Persian steppes with their long waving lines of grey and yellow, a region plagued with an unceasing wind, where at great distances apart appear rocky islets, a fortified village, a crumbling fortress, a barren oasis.

Major Lacoste's book is a continuous diary, in which the traveller has written down his impressions in a swift and animated narrative, describing the topography, the appearance, the fauna, the flora of the regions he traversed, the ethnology and customs of the peoples he met in his travels. Landscapes blazing with heat or frozen, the effects of solitude and silence, Mongolian encampments, Tibetan interiors, lama-series, monasteries where the monks unceasingly turn their prayer-mills, enchanted palaces where legendary kings once lived, dead towns, so proud in their sad state, which were founded by fabled conquerors, flourishing cities nestling on river-banks, villages buried in green mountain-recesses, temples, altars, tombs, monuments of every kind, the keepers of inviolable secrets; pilgrim rocks which, fallen from mountain-tops, and pushed by generations of believers for centuries, accomplish, a thing past all imagining, their journey towards the holy places; battlemented castles which recall feudal days, fortresses ambushed

like cut-throats at the shoulder of forbidding rocks, or reared to giddy heights, as though to command the airy plains—Major Lacoste gives us an exact and coloured picture of everything he sees, and is never at a loss for words to convey the emotions he feels, and to help us to penetrate into the inner meaning of things.

## II

Major Lacoste is something more than a daring and cheery traveller ; he is a penetrating observer, well equipped with science and wide general knowledge.

Not satisfied with observing the natural bearing and aspect of places, the character and race of peoples, he studied the position, the influence, the respective powers of the European nations that move round the central mass of Asia, as well as the means that these nations employ in order to ensure their ascendancy.

" There is only one heir to Central Asia," wrote the Tsar, Peter I, in his will, " and no Power in the world will be able to prevent him from taking possession of his inheritance."

From the seventeenth century onwards Russia has been casting glances at India ; the Conquest of India is the prime article of all her Eastern politics. Trade roads, scientific missions, religious activity, financial operations, policing the roads, organising customs-systems, delimitation of boundaries, annexations,

treaties, blows with the armed hand—she has not shrunk from any means of advancing the realisation of her dream, and of making for herself friends, allies, or vassals.

She has massed in Turkestan and Bokhara an imposing force of about 80,000 men, organised with some units of the Russian army, some regiments of Cossacks, and some native troops recruited on the spot. She has set up on the frontier of Persia, Afghanistan, and the Pamirs, notably at Seraks, Kushk, Kerki, and Termèz, a powerful ring of advanced posts, fortresses, strongholds, and central storehouses abundantly supplied with ammunition and victuals.

Between Gultcha, Osh and Horok, that is to say, in the region nearest to China and India, she has established a double line of outposts and look-out stations so near each other that no contrabandist could possibly pass it.

This system of fortification is completed with a great net-work of roads and strategic railways.

There are, in the first place, the two great lines which might be called the invading routes—the Central Asia railway which crosses the whole of the northern front of Afghanistan, and extends from the Caspian Sea to Ferganah, passing by Askhabad, Merv, Bokhara, and Samarkand, and the railway from Orenbourg to Tashkend.

From these two lines branch two far-entering roads which descend perpendicularly to the south, the one from Merv to Kusht, carrying the Tsar's soldiers to within twenty leagues of Hérat, the other from Samarkand to Termèz and the passage of Banian; but this—its construction having been broken off—is still

far from reaching the Afghan frontier. Independently of these railroads, Russia can avail herself of a river waterway, the Amu-Darya, which joins up the lake of Aral with Termèz, and of two chief strategic routes, the one which, running from Andijan to Osh, extends to the military station of Pamir and leads to the passages of Baroghil and Yonov; the other and more important one, which starts from Askhabad, crosses Meshed, and keeps its course onwards to Seïstan and Baluchistan.

In face of Slavish menace England has not remained inactive. After maintaining her position on the plateau of the Deccan, in the valley of the Ganges and on the Indus, she has spread out from every point where she did not touch the sea. She has advanced ceaselessly towards the north and the west in order to get possession of territories which, by their configuration, formed a natural barrier, and could shelter her from a violent blow. A hundred times she has shifted her boundary, using diplomacy as well as money, and, when that did not suffice, using force; disquieted neither by the rights which she was violating nor by the protests to which she was giving rise, heeding nothing but her own interest and the Empire's security. She has put the finishing touch to her work by creating on the forefront of her line of defences a succession of provinces and buffer-states, designed in the event of a struggle to serve as a shield, and to deaden the initial blow.

India is protected on the north by the Himalayas and the snowy ramparts of Hindu-Kush; but she is ill-protected on the north-west and the west. Afghanistan, Cashmere, and Baluchistan have never stopped

the way of the invader. Where Tiglath-Pileser, Alexander, Tamerlane, Nadir-Shah have passed, there Russia also can pass.

England for a long time had visions of taking the offensive, and advancing on Hindu-Kush. This idea she seems to have abandoned, and she now confines herself to the strong defence of her immediate frontier by means of a series of posts, batteries, forts, and entrenched camps. These military works are planted in *échelon* from Gilgit, situated as an outlook on the road that descends from the plateaux of Pamir by the passes of Yonov and Baroghil as far as Killa-Robat overlooking Seïstan, passing by Chitral, which bars the approaches from Afghanistan, and Peshawar which holds the Kyber Pass, the route for nearly every one of the emperors of India.

All these points are joined up with a great metalled net-work, which runs from the foot of the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean, following the left bank of the Indus. Where these secondary lines do not directly reach the centres to which they are designed to carry provisions and material support, they are extended by means of military roads suitable for convoys and mountain guns. Lastly, two carriage-roads, the one going northward from Rawal-Pindi to Srinagar, the other leading westward from Dera-Ismaïl-Khan to the pass through which the river Luni flows, make sure the Empire's communications with the strategic zone of the north-west frontier. But the key to the position is the country which forms the eastern escarpment of the Iran plateau, namely, Afghanistan. Situated between Russian Turkestan and British India, bristling with formidable mountains, rent with deep

gorges, Afghanistan holds the command of all routes, and of every pass, and opens and shuts every door.

At the same time, Afghanistan is open to attack, hemmed in, blockaded on all sides at once. A network of routes, and of encircling and entering railways, envelops her like a net, the meshes of which contract more and more every day. Fortified posts, entrenched camps, line her frontier and surround her with an iron girdle.

About this wild and rugged mass the threads of Anglo-Russian Asiatic politics cross and are entangled.

Here is being worked out one of the most exciting problems in all politics, one of those the situation created by which might upset the world's equilibrium.

Russia is only in a moderate degree concerned in occupying the desert regions, the oases and the high steppes of Asia, if she is not one day to reach the open sea and occupy the whole or a part of the peninsula of Hindustan; and England cannot, without ceasing to be England, abandon the splendid prey to her rival.

Who will carry it off? No one can say. We can only see that, in the day of conflict, the problem most difficult to solve will be that of supplying provisions. An army which had its convoys stopped or plundered in the defiles, which had its communications with its base of operations cut, would run the greatest risks. It is possible to conjecture in that case, that the issue of the struggle would depend, in a great degree, on the attitude of the Amir of Kabul. The one who holds the Amir will hold the trump-card. For the moment chance seems to incline to the side of England. The Amir, Habibullah, sent his son to salute the Viceroy

of India on the morrow of the battle of Mukden. But what is the true significance and import of that proceeding ?

Between Afghanistan and England there exist many grounds for ill-feeling. The innumerable little wars with Kabul, Kohistan, Gil-Saï, the Afridis, and other Afghan tribes, says MacGregor, tend to join all the peoples into one, into an united Afghanistan, but united in the sentiment of an implacable hatred for us.[1]

MacGregor might have added that several of the campaigns to which he refers were in truth campaigns of extermination, at the end of which there remained neither a village nor a human being anywhere. Acts like these have long memories ; and there is an Indian proverb which says : " God preserve you from the vengeance of an elephant, a cobra, and an Afghan."

## III

M. Lebedev, an officer of the Grenadier Guards, published in 1898 a book which most exactly sums up Russia's aspirations in the East.[2]

From the very first page Lebedev lays it down as a first principle that Russia must advance to the open sea and establish herself on the Indus.

He recalls the efforts of Alexis Michalovich, of Peter the Great, and of Catherine, to strengthen the Muscovite influence in Central Asia. He recalls the plans laid by the Emperor Paul, by Napoleon I and Alexander

[1] MacGregor. *The Defence of India.*
[2] Lebedev. *Vers l'Inde.*

after Tilsit, by Tchikhatchev, by Kroulev, and, in 1876, by Skobelev, for invading India. He maintains that the last-named project would have been realised, if England had not kindled the flame of war and induced a quarrel between Russians and Turks in the Balkans. He makes a study of the topography, calculates the strength of the respective parties, weighs their chances of success, and shows that victory ought to rest with the Russians.

In a final chapter he examines the advantages Russia could draw from this victory, and thus concludes: "The following solution would seem to be the most advantageous for us:—

"To establish our protectorate over Afghanistan, with or without the occupation of that country, while holding all Afghan Turkestan, which will give us a natural frontier on the south, and annexing all the country enclosed within the following limits: on the west, Persia; on the north, the mountains of Hezareh, our true boundary, a conventional line between Kelati-Gilzaï and Dera-Ismaïl-Khan; on the east, the Indus; on the south, the sea.

"A railway will cross this territory from the Caspian Sea to Herat, Kandahar, Djakobabad, Rori and Kurachi —mention has already been made of the commercial advantages resulting from the occupation of this region. By the acquisition of the territory along the Indus, we shall be able to establish on the Indus a base from which to invade India; and thus we shall hold in our hands the sword of Damocles, which will give us the means of paralysing every dangerous attempt that England will be able to direct against us in Europe. Further, our position on the Indus

will compel the English to augment their military force in India, to increase their expenses, and will reduce them to a state of perpetual alarm for their rule in Hindustan. In all likelihood, this will bring us to the issue we desire, the conclusion of a close alliance between Russia and Great Britain, that will be advantageous to both Powers. It will be favourable to England, because it will rid her of the fear of losing India, the inhabitants of which country will be compelled to submit to their fate, since they will be no longer able to count the Russians as their deliverers when once they have become the allies of the English. For Russia, the alliance will be of advantage, because, with the help of England, the strongest of sea-powers, the former's position in Europe will be strengthened and the Eastern question will be able to solve itself to her advantage. Moreover, our allies in India will no longer be fanatical Musulmans nor low-caste Indians, but Englishmen, the foremost nation in the world. Most probably things will not advance to the point of a campaign in the heart of India, because England will decide not to risk her hold upon that country on a single throw of the cards, but will accept all the conditions that we shall impose upon her on the banks of the Indus."

In the end Lebedev is brought to the axiom laid down by Skobelev :—

"The stronger Russia becomes in Central Asia, the weaker will England become in India and the more accommodating in Europe."

In 1902 pessimism prevailed in London ; there was the belief that this irresistible forward movement of Russia could not be checked, and Englishmen already

saw the Cossacks encamped on the shores of the Persian Gulf.

An encounter between the two rival nations appeared inevitable. But the Russo-Japanese war broke out, the Russian Far-Eastern fleet was destroyed, the Manchurian campaign opened, Japan was victorious, and all the conditions of the problem were reversed. The two nations which were on the point of coming to blows, threw down their arms, concluded a treaty, and signed an agreement (Sept. 27, 1907) regulating their action in Persia, the particular point where their contact was most vital and dangerous.

The reasons for this sudden change are obvious. The Japanese victories stirred the Asiatic peoples to the lowest depths.

After Mukden and Tsushima all the Far-Eastern peoples were conscious of the inward awakening of a sentiment previously unknown to them—the sentiment of racial solidarity and common interest as against the Western conquerors. Japan appeared to them to be as it were the deliverer of Asia.

When we closely examine this movement, we find—in the Iranian region, Persia, Afghanistan, Kachgarie, a general ferment, aspirations after independence still formless but quite perceptible, a marked decline of Russian influence, a spirit of defiance and hostility towards foreigners.

" As regards India, a wide national tendency which is upsetting old separatist prejudice, is breaking down the hierarchy of the caste system and consolidating races, sects, villages, and provinces in a common activity." [1]

Lastly, from the Caucasus to China and from the

[1] E. Piriou. *L'Inde contemporaine.*

Transcaspian provinces to the Pacific, a pan-Islamist movement that reaches, in India, the highest point of its curve.

In the countries subject to Russian ascendency new ideas advance slowly, inasmuch as they are presented to populations scattered about in desert districts, steppes, oases, and mountain ranges. In India they are propagated more quickly, for there the population is of extreme density, and there they are gathered up by an intellectual *élite* of the natives, restless and many in number, who scatter them abroad in handfuls.

What is the barrier against which those new ideas, which at present merely form a swollen torrent, will dash themselves? England? And what is England's position at the present moment?

"The English in India are the representatives of a belligerent civilisation."[1] A race daring, vigorous, wilful, and masterful, with whom law is an inborn taste, and as it were a natural desire, they have perforce imposed upon their subjects order, peace, and prosperity. It is inconceivable to them that there can exist a system of government superior to that of India, and they are quite sincere. They see in that system only its majestic façade, its imposing magnitude, its long continuance and the profits it yields to the mother-state.

"Let not this unspeakable blessing of the *Pax Britannica* be forgotten," said a former Lieut.-Governor. "There are not many European countries where protection to life and property is so complete. Excepting England and her colonies, and the United States of America, there is hardly a country in the world where

[1] Fitzjames Stephen.

there is so little needless interference on the part of the Government with personal liberty, or such freedom in the public expression of opinions in matters of politics and religion. . . . Unbroken tranquillity prevails everywhere. Justice is administered under laws of unequalled excellence and simplicity. There is no country possessing a civilised administration where taxation is so light or commerce is more free." [1]

John Stuart Mill went further. He declared that "British rule in India is not only one of the purest in intention, but one of the most beneficent in act, ever known among mankind."

If we place ourselves at the point of view exclusively English, and, without any generous and humanitarian prepossession and without any thought for the future, consider only the century that has just passed, there is nothing in that judgment to be retracted.

The work accomplished in India by the English is an immense one. Out of a confused and chaotic mass they have made an organised body. They have carried with them all the improvements of science and Western civilisation. Their system of government is a model of order, of method, of stability; it realises, in a powerful way, the ideal of colonisation, and far surpasses everything that other nations have attempted.

There is only one dark shadow in the picture.

In spite of the services, never to be forgotten, which England has rendered, there has not resulted any blending of conqueror and conquered since the first days of the conquest. From day to day the racial antagonism, the divergence of aims and principles, the conflict of interests are more and more accentuated. Uneasiness grows apace, and one long complaining

[1] Strachey. *India.*

cry goes up from one end of the Empire to the other. In this profound peace, under the protection of those perfect laws, India declares that she is a slave, and is dying of wretchedness. She asserts that the mother-state has forgotten the noble traditions of Bentinck and Macaulay, as well as the solemn promises she gave in 1830 and 1858; she demands the reform of a system of government which, by draining all the substance of India for the profit of the English State, and of English traders, merchants and speculators, enriches the foreigner and ruins the native. Long ago the natives were thinking all this, but did not dare to say it. Since the institution of the National Congresses they have grown bolder, and no longer are afraid to make their plaints and wishes heard. These Congresses were first instituted in 1885. They are chiefly due to Sir William Hunter, one of the choicest spirits in England, one of those men who best understand the Indian question. Their object is to bring together once a year the most enlightened representatives of India, in order to study the economic, moral and social conditions of the country, to find out lawful and constitutional methods of improving the lot of the people, and to approximate to a more exalted civic and political ideal.

As long as it was able, the English administrative government ignored these Congresses. The words "control," "political equality," "liberty," pronounced by native reformers, had an unpleasant sound in its ears.

No reasonable person, it used to be said, could take seriously the wild and Utopian talk of those agitators. Lord Dufferin, in the speech he delivered in the Town Hall, in December, 1888, on the eve of his assuming the

post of Ambassador to Rome, adopted a haughty attitude towards national aspirations and schemes of opposition, and declared that the English Government was not disposed " either to allow its proceedings to be fettered or limited, or to suffer a microscopic minority to control its acts and its administration."

These ideas have made a more rapid advance than was imagined. The Indian National Party has been organised, and it now has to be reckoned with in Calcutta and in London. The Utopia of yesterday may quite possibly be the reality of to-morrow.

There is one question that presents itself whenever India is named. How can a few thousands of officials and 50,000 or 60,000 English troops, supported by 150,000 native soldiers rule and maintain an Empire of 300 millions of souls ? The answer is supplied us by the English themselves. Professor Seeley explains that England is established in India not by conquest, but by a domestic revolution that she has inspired and guided, and which has been carried out by the Indians themselves. England's superiority and her genius for organising, however powerful we might conceive of it as being, could never have rendered her capable of conquering by military force alone the Continent of India with its 250 millions of population, if there had been found in that country true nations.

The fundamental fact is that India had no jealousy of the foreigner, because India had no sense whatever of national unity, because there *was* no India, and therefore, properly speaking, no foreigner.

And Sir John Strachey adds :—

" We have never destroyed in India a national Government; no national sentiment has been wounded;

no national pride has been humiliated, and this not through any design or merit of our own, but because no Indian nationalities have existed."

The East used to be nothing more than a glittering dust. At an infinite distance of time, certain masses of humanity, which the prejudices of race, of religion, and of sect prevented from understanding and uniting themselves, were in a state of confused agitation. But mark how the misunderstandings are vanishing, how hatreds are abating, how minds are becoming enlightened with a gleam of sudden light. Men who knew only the village, the valley, or the mountain where they were born and died, catch a glimpse, in the widening horizon, of other countries where live countless men like themselves, having, if not the same language, the same faith and the same origin, or at least the same destiny.

The thrill of their collective life has, for the first time, revealed to them their tie of brotherhood and their strength. Races listless and dumb for centuries past are coming out of their long sleep and awakening to life. Nations which knew not themselves are gaining self-consciousness. Millions of human beings who lived with face bent on the ground under foreign masters, are lifting themselves erect and dreaming of a different future. The masses in India are stirred to their depths, Islam is organising itself, and flinging itself into the current of life as a whole. Everywhere there is, as it were, a Renascence, more consummate and more widespread than that of the sixteenth century, which aroused the whole world and renewed its youth.

Hitherto, all our thoughts had been centred on Japan.

Her rapid uplifting, the suddenness of her victories, had impressed the minds of all. But Japan is not the whole of Asia. She is but a daring outpost, situated on its Eastern flank. On the Continent in the Buddhist, Mohammedan, and Confucian East there are lying dormant irresistible forces. There are to be found inexhaustible springs of energy the murmur of which we have hardly begun to catch, and which will inundate Europe as soon as they leave their channel.

"The birth of patriotism in India," writes M. Piriou, "is the most important fact and the newest since Brahmanism was founded."

"The Russo-Japanese War," M. Cheradame in his turn remarks, "by the novelty and greatness of the problems which she is suddenly propounding, opens up a new era of the world's history."

Lord Curzon and the high Indian officials whose responsibility in regard to the preparation of this war is so great, because they never ceased, during the period of tension, to arouse the jingoism of their countrymen and the Chauvinism of the Japanese, did not foresee the result. Several of the European nations also were neither more foreseeing nor more sagacious.[1] A juster view was taken by the English Government. King Edward VII and his Ministers pursued throughout a wise, loyal, and humane policy; but they were unable to contest public opinion, led as it was by Imperialists and speculators in London.

Every mistake has to be paid for. The Indian problem is propounded, and with it the whole Asiatic problem. Not only is England concerned with it; it forces itself upon the attention of all the Western nations.

[1] Victor Bérard. *Lord Curzon et le Tibet.*

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is impossible for me here to thank, as I should wish to thank, all those who lent me their co-operation in organising my expedition, and contributed to the success of my enterprise with their advice as well as their support.

Let me, however, express my most respectful and warmest thanks to the President, M. Loubet, whose valuable encouragement was never lacking.

The Geographical Society, the French Asiatic Association, the Academy of Inscriptions and Literature, and the Museum associated themselves with my expedition with a good-will, the value of which I duly appreciate. Nor can I ever forget the various officials I met *en route* in Persia, Russia, and India, all of whom helped me in the most cordial and obliging manner, and of whose kindness I retain a grateful recollection.

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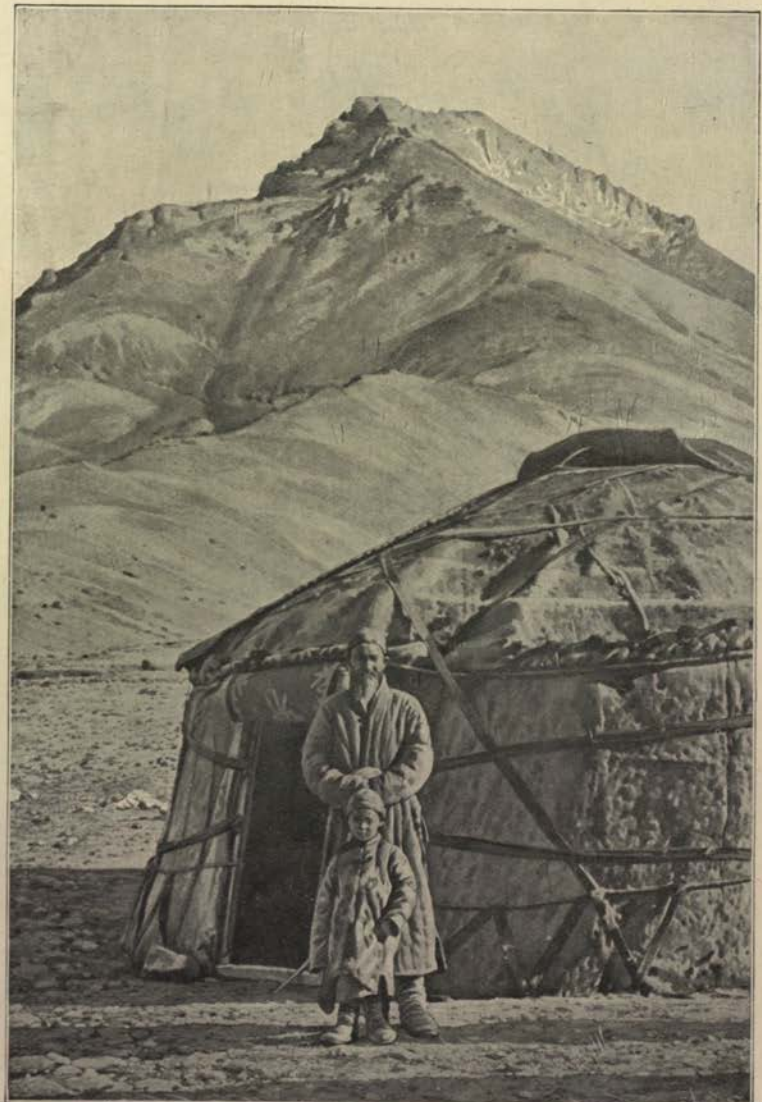


THE AKSAKAL OF MUKUR-CHETCHAK-CHI IN FRONT OF HIS YOORT

# AROUND AFGHANISTAN

## CHAPTER I

### FROM TEHERAN TO MESHED

DEPARTURE from Teheran—The caravansaries of Khorassan—Meeting with the pilgrims of Bagdad—Opium smokers—Prince Djalil—A Persian ballet by moonlight—Infested Sharud—On the way to Madan—Turquoise mines—Meshed, the holy city.

IF we glance at a map of Central Asia, there is one country which seems both mysterious and seductive. I mean Afghanistan. Having four times already penetrated into the Asiatic Continent, I had long been haunted with the wish to follow as closely as possible that impassable frontier, and as the territories of the Ameer of Kabul were forbidden to me as to everyone else, I wished at least to try and go round them. I spoke of my plans to Enselme, an artillery captain who had formerly accompanied me on a journey through Manchuria, and he agreed to join me in attempting an adventure full of unforeseen incidents, and for that very reason so much the more attractive.

Leaving Paris on the 21st of March, 1906, we reached Teheran on the 15th of April without hindrance. In the Persian capital, I had the pleasure to find once more two old acquaintances, Doctor Schneider, the Shah's physician, and Mr. Joseph Cotte, tutor to the Imperial Princes. I shall ever keep a grateful recollection of the liberal and cordial hospitality which they gave me. At the French Legation I was welcomed in a delightful way by our *Chargé d'Affaires*, Count d'Apchier le Maugin, who was good enough to introduce me to his Russian and British colleagues, and in that way helped to simplify my journey into Turkestan, India, and Baluchistan. Finally, both of us had the great honour of being received in private audience by His Majesty Muzaffaru'ddin, who assured us of his most cordial help in the course of the journey we contemplated across his empire.

It now only remained for us to hasten the preparations for our journey, the first stage of which was to bring us from Teheran to Askhabad before we took the Transcaucasian railway. This was by no means the easiest.

The road from Teheran to Meshed is but little frequented except by wretched caravans of pilgrims. But there is a regular and well-organised postal service, the management of which is in the hands of a single individual, a rich Persian, to whom we had to apply in order to get the means of transport we required.

THE CARRIAGE IN WHICH WE CROSSED KHORASSAN

ENSELME IS ABOUT TO CROSS THE RIVER ON ABBAS'S BACK

On the 27th of April at nine in the morning the carriage was in front of Mr. Cotte's house, where we were guests. Its effect was not unpleasing. The springs, somewhat strained, had, as a precaution, been tightly bound with cord; but the cushions, although wanting in the softness of the divans of a harem, promised us relative comfort. What put us at once in good humour and gave us confidence was the original appearance of the magnificent team of four thoroughbred horses of the finest black and brilliantly caparisoned. Their collars sparkled, inlaid with blue stones, and to crown this coquettish display they wore in their tails, as women in their tresses, brooches in imitation turquoise with the most delightful effect.

We took with us as interpreter a certain Abbas, a respectable old man who spoke French but little and very badly, and who had been procured for us, not without considerable difficulty, by Mr. d'Apchier le Maugin.

At last we were ready: the excitement connected with our departure, the apprehension of the unknown had taken possession of us, and when our baggage was loaded up we took final leave of our host. Then, at a sign from Abbas, the driver started his four stallions with a magnificent flourish of the whip, and we left Teheran in brilliant sunshine.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. We were carried along by the brisk trot of the horses between two chains of hills of which the exquisitely delicate tints,

now of rose, now of purple, were shown up against a sky of wonderful purity.

At Khatun-Abad we found the first relay,[1] but fortunately we were not obliged to spend the night there. Later and at a further point we were to have an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the cockroaches, bugs, and other insects, the sole inhabitants of those wretched yet precious hovels. There old Abbas showed us his skill as a *chef*. He would certainly have had much to learn before he could have ventured to face a European cooking range; but his way of lighting wood-charcoal was worth noting. He put the charcoal, after kindling one piece, into a kind of small salad-basket suspended by a string. A few twirls and the whole was well alight. It was clean and quick.

The road continued in a somewhat monotonous fashion as far as Sherif-Abad, where we had tea under the plane-trees. Abbas, knife in hand, asked us very seriously to cut our initials on the trunks of the trees, as Mussulman travellers never fail to do. Enselme could not resist the temptation to show his characteristically Parisian fancy by etching in the tender bark a heart pierced by an arrow.

Persian gardens, almost all alike, have no peculiarly

[1] The post-caravansaries which are placed at intervals on the road from Teheran to Meshed are all built on the same plan, and are very uncomfortable—a big square court-yard surrounded by stables for the relay horses and on the terrace, above the entrance, a kind of room for the traveller.

GENERAL MAP OF THE REGION TRAVERSED BY THE AUTHOR

strange features and are wanting in picturesqueness. They are surrounded by a wall twelve feet high; inside, along the wall, is a row of poplars; the centre forms the starting point of several walks bordered by the same trees; and this symmetrical rigidity is scarcely relieved by the disorder of the beds as a whole, where grow, at the will of Allah, grass, bushes, a few fruit trees, roses, and poppies. There, on their piece of carpet, the Persians sit in the shade by the side of the streams, and there they read or recite aloud to each other the harmonious lines of the old poets, till the hour of prayer brings them together in a common outburst of devotion to the Most High.

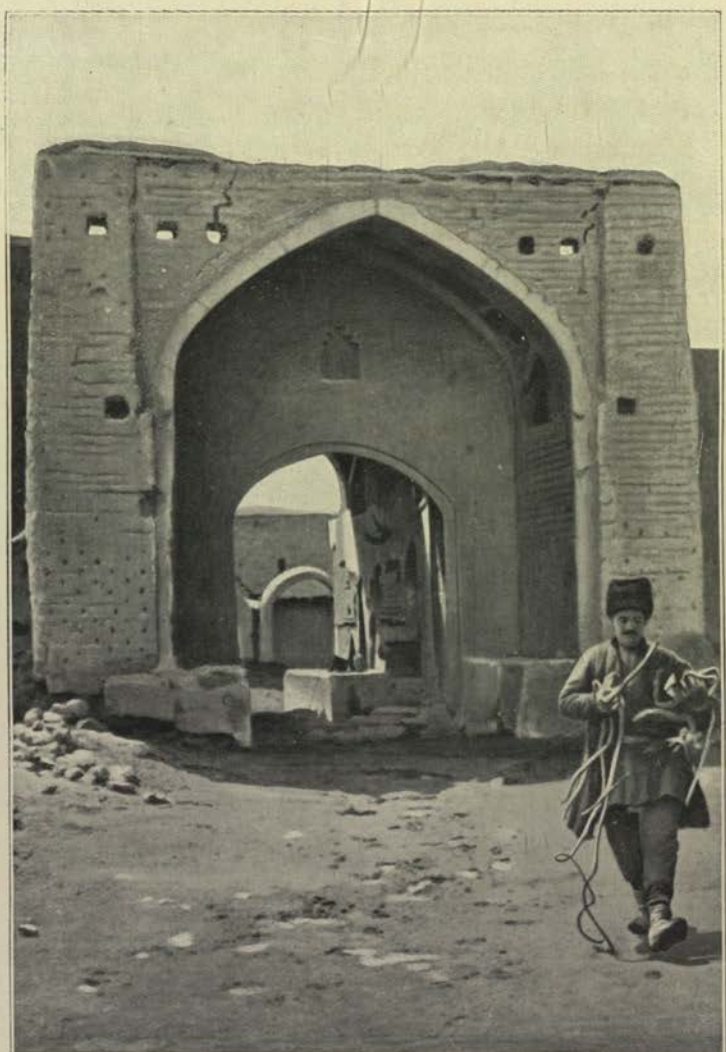
On leaving the cool shade of the plane trees, we entered upon a region which clearly formed part of the desert. On the left overlooking Teheran stood the magnificent peak of the Demavend[1] with its glaciers of considerable importance, while further on the right towered the "Salt Mountains," of which the strangely formed crest is all rosy with the last gleams of the setting sun.

During this first stage we had not found the heat too insufferable. Our brougham was well closed and its substantial roof intercepted the rays of a merciless sun; but the night we were compelled to spend in the caravansary of Ivan-i-Keif was most intolerable. The heat was oppressive and unhealthy, my sleep was restless, and it was scarcely daybreak when the bustle

[1] Altitude = 5,670 metres.

of life outside brought me hastily on the terrace, where I witnessed a picturesque departure of villagers going to the fields seated on their donkeys. A hot west wind was blowing as we resumed our journey at eight o'clock. Presently a river barred our way, but Abbas carried us across on his back; that old man was decidedly useful. The road was so narrow that the carriage was obliged for seven kilometres to follow the deeply sunk bed of the torrent. This was the pass called "Pylæ Caspiæ." We left it to return to the desert, where we outstripped caravans of wretched Arabs going on pilgrimage from Bagdad to Meshed. To obtain Heaven these poor fanatical creatures undertake, with a few dates in their sacks, that long road—nearly a hundred days' journey—living in privation upon charity. They strongly reminded me of the Bedouins I formerly met on the banks of the Jordan,—the same costume, the same type, the same tatooing on the hands and forehead. They were accompanied by a few women riding on donkeys, feeble emaciated beasts which get but little food and hardly any rest, and have open wounds caused by the cruppers. We had no time, however, to spend on pity: the relay was near. We had now reached the village of Geshlag and its dilapidated caravansary with its court-yard full of opium smokers.

In Khorassan many smoke the fatal drug, but not as in China, lying on the ground by the side of the little lamp with its mother-of-pearl figures. The



THE OLD CARAVANSARY OF ABDUL-ABAD

smokers here sit squat, the pipe is of a different pattern, and the opium is lit by a burning coal taken with the tongs and placed on the bowl of the pipe. Our arrival did not awaken any movement of timid curiosity among these unhappy beings, and we watched them while taking our eggs and tea.

Among the smokers, I noticed with astonishment a woman with a child in her arms. She had come near our table and was begging for something in terms which Abbas refused to translate. Her expressionless eyes wandered to each of us in turn. I drew aside the clothes which half concealed the child she was carrying: a pale thin face appeared. It uttered a cry. And then I saw that unheard of, unimaginable thing, a thing I had never seen even in China where the *black idol*, nevertheless, makes so much havoc: the mother took a long inhalation of the poison, half opened the child's lips, and to pacify it breathed into its mouth the warm smoke she had just inhaled . . . , and the poor puny creature, stupefied, went to sleep.[1] We hastened to leave this den of nightmares.

During the halt the wind had risen, and we proceeded in a storm of sand, leaving on our right the ruined kaleh of Aradan which looked like an ancient citadel.

Formerly, before the Russians had overcome

[1] This disastrous custom is apparently practised by many Persian women, who are inveterate smokers. So that we see children unable to walk sucking an opium pipe instead of a feeding bottle.

Turkestan, the Turkomans, a savage and pillaging tribe, made fearful inroads into Khorassan. The veritable scourge of Northern Persia, they laid waste everything on their way, taking with them to be sold, women, children, and cattle. As places of refuge from the horde in its dreadful passage there were raised in the centre of the villages and generally everywhere in the fields numbers of these "Kalehs" or fortresses from which, by a sentinel always on the watch, the raids of the Turkomans—the "Alamans" as they were then called —were signalled with the sound of a trumpet. Every living being, whoever he might be, whenever the echo repeated the sound of that kind of tocsin, took refuge in the fortress and erected barricades. The disappointed horde went further to carry on its cruel mission; and the Persian husbandman, having escaped the razzia, could resume his ploughing. It is not more than thirty or forty years since the Russians put an end to this by enrolling these fierce bandits in the Cossack regiments, and it is only since then that tranquillity can have been restored among the peaceable tribes of Khorassan.

The only picturesque point about the caravansary of Ali-Abad is its tank surmounted by a pointed cap formed of a cone of several tiers, on which goats run about. These nimble little creatures take delight in perching on the narrow passages, and at times seem in their attitude of motionless attention like ornaments of bronze, the work of some Persian Frémiet.... The

PERSIAN CHILDREN

DEFILE TO THE EAST OF IVAN-I-KEIF

post which preceded us had taken all the horses, and we were obliged to wait till our own had rested before starting again. We spent our second night at Deh-Nernek. It was raining, and the atmosphere having become markedly cooler, we at length took a well-earned rest. At dawn, we were awakened by the mullahs calling the people to prayer. We had excellent milk to refresh us. The brougham was got ready; we were off.

We reached Abdul-Abad, then Lasghird, the ruined " kaleh " of which you see from afar as well as the old caravansary built in the seventeenth century in the reign of the Shah Abbas, whose name our aged interpreter was proud to bear. This emperor, who might justly be named the benefactor of the desert or the father of travellers, had caused to be raised, at intervals along the routes followed by the caravans, spacious inns as refuges for his people of pilgrims and business men. Unfortunately, he has never had any imitators, and the formerly comfortable hostelries are now almost all falling to ruin.

I was present at the feeding of the horses: they were given barley and straw in a sort of canvas hammock swung on four stakes. An enormous bell was attached to the hammock. As long as they are eating the bell rings; as soon as they have finished the tinkling stops and thus they indicate of themselves that they are ready to start.

In the little village of Sorkhay, famous for the

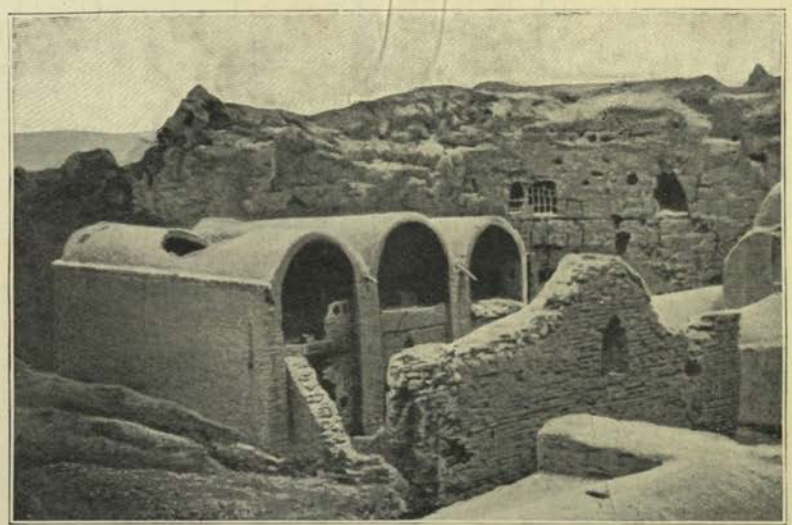
growing of melons, which attain, it is said, an extraordinary size,[1] we met with a prince who, like ourselves, was going to Meshed. He told us his name : Djalil-Mirza.[2]

Ahevant, the following relay, is a new village, pretty, clean-looking, with poplar nurseries, cool avenues of young trees, and here and there clear babbling brooks. The softness of the sky, the coolness of the landscape, invited to repose and untied the tongue. Prince Djalil talked and informed us that he had been recently made contractor of the turquoise mines of Madan. This noble personage gave a vague impression of a prince of the *Arabian Nights* who had disguised himself as a merchant to recover some stolen treasure. It was undoubtedly to get further into our good graces that he offered us eggs, coloured red like our common Easter eggs, and found in all Persian bazaars. We journeyed together as far as Gokay.

I was not mistaken. We were in the country of Sheerazad. Night had fallen ; the moon was shining brightly. Just as we were leaving the table the prince gave a sign. Musicians, who seemed to have risen out of the earth, placed themselves in front of the caravansary, stretched before us an enormous carpet of many colours around which Djalil with a royal

[1] Seven melons are enough it appears for a camel's load.

[2] The word Mirza placed after a name means "prince"; when it precedes the name it simply means "literate."



RUINED DWELLING IN THE ANCIENT "KALEH" OF DEH-NEMEK

THE PRETTY VILLAGE WITH THE EUPHONIOUS NAME OF MEYAMEÏ

gesture invited us to sit, and to counterbalance the harsh effect of the Persian melodies which proceeded from a kind of rustic reed accompanied by a tambourine, he offered us pistachios and preserves. The heavens were sparkling; suddenly, in a ray of moonlight, a young boy dancer,[1] with long hair, shot out, sylph-like, from the shadow, and we were the wondering spectators of a most original and picturesque kind of dancing. Then, as if by enchantment, a cloud passed over the moon, the light was extinguished, the music ceased, and everything was gone. It seemed to me that we had had a dream. Alas no! we were awake, very much awake.... Young fleas, hungry for new flesh, did not cease to remind us of it during the whole night.

*May 1st.* We are thinking of Paris. What is going on in the capital? Already when we left, a popular outbreak was feared on that date. Who knows when we shall have news! Here the weather is splendid. At an early hour we are on the way toward the snow-capped mountains. We halted at Sed-Abad, then at Damgan, a large town celebrated for its ancient mosques. After passing through the village of Mehmandust, we galloped at a frantic pace as far as Deh-i-Molla, where we found the prince smoking his *Kalyan.*[2]

[1] Persian women are forbidden to appear in public and, consequently, to dance.

[2] The Persian water-pipe.

He warned us against a troublesome guest whose presence from that time had to be feared—the bug, the terrible bug of Sharud.[1] We avoided a too lengthy stay in this wretched caravansary, and we traversed the desert at a rapid pace as far as Sharud, the centre of the epidemic.

There we were delighted to be able to spend the night with the " Taguir-Bashi " or head of the merchantmen, an old Armenian who welcomed us in a very amicable way, in a little house built in European fashion and brilliantly lighted to celebrate our arrival. Our host would have liked to keep us several days and introduce us to the governor, but we were anxious to leave that town with its bad repute, and we started the next day at dawn.

The road was monotonous and difficult, of sand and pebbles, as far as the pretty village with the harmonious name of Meyameï, where you arrive by an avenue lined with superb plane trees. Thanks to the recommendations of the Taguir-Bashi, we were received in the house of the Mayor of the place who welcomed us without enthusiasm. However, he put us into a well-lighted room on the first floor where, after a walk through the town with its winding streets barred here and there by old badly-jointed gates, we met

[1] The natives, forced to live with this noxious insect, have long become inoculated against its bite, and their skin has no longer any attraction for it ; but a foreigner, when bitten by the terrible bug, falls into a kind of anemia so pronounced that the sufferer has for seven or eight months a kind of sleeping sickness.

WE MET ARABS GOING ON PILGRIMAGE FROM BAGDAD TO MESHED

VILLAGE OF TORTOISES IN THE PLAIN OF GARN-AB ON THE MADAN ROAD

around the samovar with prince Djalil and one of his *aides de camp*. The evening was delightful; and the delicate clouds which hovered in the sky already turning purple seemed to be spangled with golden dust, and through the open windows there came snatches of songs in barbaric rhythm accompanied in the distance by the slow and monotonous note of the mullahs reciting their prayers.

On leaving Meyameï next morning, we met near the caravansary of Kal-Tagh some tortoises moving peacefully along. Further on we merely passed through Abbas-Abad, a picturesque village like an eagle's nest. Suddenly a vast sheet of water lay sparkling before us in the gathering gloom. It was the salt lake of Meizanan. The day was uneventful enough, but on it took place our first accident—a broken shaft, which forced us to spend the night in a very uninviting house. But the weather changed; the wind blew a hurricane, and we had to take shelter.

Nothing noteworthy took place till, on the evening of the 5th of May, we came to Shur-Ab as we passed out of a somewhat picturesque defile. It was from that point we were to start for the turquoise mines of Madan, which I was very anxious to visit. The distance was five farsaks, viz., twenty-one miles, and we were asked fifty francs to convey us three miles. For twenty francs only Abbas undertook to obtain donkeys, and we went to sleep on the strength of that good promise.

At dawn, the harmonious braying of the asses awoke us. We went down into the street where Abbas and they were fidgeting impatiently. Sorry long-eared gentlemen! Their plumage and their song did not harmonise. The interpreter, filled with anxiety, brought me a white ass less shabby-looking than the others. He caressed its rump as he said: "Kheïleh khoûb, Saheb, kheïleh khoûb"[1] and there I was without saddle or bridle seated on a kind of pack-saddle on the back of my holy ass, whose behaviour as I afterwards found was the cause of much unholy language. A few strokes of the cudgel applied unstintedly, and we left the village.

For two hours the small caravan made its way through a country studded with hummocks; on all sides were rice-fields arranged in tiers, where the peasants were busy sowing cotton-seed. All the men were in the fields; we noticed, as we passed through the hamlet of Garm-Ab, only a few women walking on the roofs.

The plain which lay before us as we left the village was all carpeted with anemones, lilies, and poppies. There we came upon a multitude of tortoises moving about, which our donkeys stepped over as gracefully as possible. It was ten o'clock in the morning, and the heat already stifling. My white mount hung his head in a pitiful way, and Enselme's stopped methodically every four paces. But the driver of the party

[1] Very good, master, very good.

VIEW OF MADAN-I-FIRUZA

THE DONKEYS THAT WILL CARRY US TO THE TURQUOISE MINES

undertook to awaken the ardour of the animals by the help of a short steel chain which he carried tied to his wrist by a thong.

At eleven o'clock we had done with that irksome plain as we entered the little village of Solamanieh. My donkey stopped in front of a tent of camel skins where two old men were kindly cleansing each other from vermin. When they saw us they scurried off to make way for us, but we showed less eagerness to take their place. The heat, however, was so great that we were glad to escape for a little from the terrible baking which made our heads swelter. Then, too, we were beginning to be accustomed to the little animals. Suddenly there is a break in the weather; big clouds darken the sky, and almost without transition the storm bursts with continuous peals of thunder. We restored to the two unclean owners their shelter, and took refuge in a neighbouring house, the owner of which, with a gracefulness which was quite oriental, sent away all the women and put us in their place on a fine felt carpet that was quite new. So that the woman's rights question had not yet reached these fortunate countries.

When the storm had abated we started on the donkeys, which seemed delighted to cool in the mud the dry horn of their hoofs. The road at first followed the bed of a river in a narrow valley where my Pegasus suddenly flung his heels in the air and nearly threw me on the ground; a covey of partridges pursued by

a vulture had grazed his ears in passing from one rock to another.

On leaving this gorge we passed along cool valleys where tired camels were rusticating. Their appearance was very wretched, and their humps hung pitiably like empty leather-bottles. They undergo there a forty days' cure, after which they resume their toilsome existence. It is with animals as with human beings. How many impaired digestions and weak backs go to recruit their strength in our spas and watering-places !

For two hours, which seemed to us endless, we passed from vale to vale.

I questioned the driver : " And Madan ? Where is Madan ? " . . . " Madan-i-Firuza[1] ?—Dur n'ist, Saheb." [2]

Then he pointed out on the horizon the village perched like an eagle's nest on the summit of a purple-tinted rock.

The sun had long since set when our small caravan reached the foot of the fortress. Wayworn, exhausted by that long stage, we did not cut a much better figure than our donkeys. Fortunately, the chief of the country set apart for our use a fairly large dwelling, the windows of which, being in the wall of circumvallation, looked out on the valley. The landscape was very picturesque, but our eyes closed in spite of ourselves, and immediately after dinner we rolled ourselves

[1] The turquoise. [2] 'Tis not far, master.

WASHING TURQUOISE GEMS AT THE MADAN MINES

in our blankets, and I was taken in my dreams to the Châtelet, where an amiable genius—Prince Djalil perhaps—showed me a ballet of precious stones in the palace of the turquoise queen.

*May 7th.* The wind and rain which raged all night did not disturb my sleep peopled with vivid dreams in which lovely ballet girls were spinning round luminous fountains. When I awoke I could explain the fountains : a gutter in the corner of the room was making a noise like a waterfall.

About eight o'clock the weather became fine and we started for the mines, followed by an escort which increased in numbers at every step. In an hour we were in front of an old mine—a wide opening which showed a passage disappearing under the ground. Yellow-beaked crows flitted around us, and I picked for my herbarium some beautiful mountain flowers which gave out a delicious scent. The rock[1] in which turquoise is found is black with metallic scintillations on the surface. It is furrowed by fissures and crevasses into which, like petrified lava, there has flowed a kind of paste resembling porcelain or glass that has hardened and taken the shape of the crevice into which it has passed. Deeper down the rock is reddish, then grows paler, and turns to sulphur yellow.

By fantastic paths we came to a mine in working order. The workmen, who use in their work smoky oil-lamps, have their clothes, hands and faces covered

[1] Petro-silicious porphyrite.

with a coating of black filth which makes them altogether resemble our coal-miners.

They work in the drifts from nine o'clock in the morning till nine in the evening. There are two gangs in each yard which relieve each other every six working hours. Each consists of: first, the "zabit," or foreman, who receives 3 krans[1] per diem; second, the "oostad," or miners, whose wages vary from 1½ to 2 Krans; third, the "amala," or labourers, who are paid 1 kran; finally, the "felah," or young boys, who earn ½ to ¾ of a kran. The foreman has three or four miners in his section. He oversees the work and gathers the turquoise; the miner excavates the rock; the labourer carries the broken pieces to the entrance of the drift; it is the duty of the young boys to break the stones and extract the gems.

The existence of these mines was mentioned for the first time in the thirteenth century. Originally let at an annual sum of 500 tomans, the rent rose to 3,000, then to 8,000, and gradually to 25,000 tomans, the present figure. According to the Customs statistics, the annual value of the exported turquoise gems is 235,000 francs or 47,000 tomans, but the total output is said by competent authorities to be four times as much, that is to say, very nearly a million francs.

At the foot of the hill and not far from the village, we stopped to notice the primitive way in which the "*felahs*" wash the pieces of rock each containing a

[1] 1 kran = 50 centimes.

THE DYERS' GATE AT NISHAPUR

bit of turquoise. Standing in three pans of running water, the boys trample with a rhythmical movement on the pointed sharp stones until they are free from the clay still adhering. This regular rubbing by the sole of the foot is accompanied by a strange and plaintive song, always the same. I suppose the children are forced to sing in order to prevent them crying out from pain. This oft-repeated exercise, however, makes the skin of their feet as hard as the stone itself and they can, it seems, remain at it several hours in succession without feeling too much inconvenience.

When we returned to the village we spent the remainder of the day there at the suggestion of our donkey-driver, who was frightened by the weather which again was threatening; but next morning at five o'clock we mounted the donkeys and took the road back to Shur-Ab. The crossing of the tortoise-strewn plain was more difficult and tropical than before. There one of our donkeys succumbed, the one which carried Mollah-Ali, our landlord, but without troubling very much about the unfortunate Persian we continued on our way at the easy pace of our tired mounts. The sun had just set when the small caravan stopped before our dwelling. Alas! a disagreeable surprise awaited us. During our absence cats had pillaged our rooms; everything was topsy-turvy. The faithful Abbas, furious because of the extra work it entailed, called down the worst curses of Allah upon the heads of

those feline devils. However, things were soon put right, and when night came we could admire the full moon which shed a fairy-like light on the white minarets of a neighbouring mosque.

The 9th of May found us on the way to Nishapur seated in our old brougham, which looked fairly well in spite of the 800 kilometres it had just accomplished. The plain around the town is all covered with "canats"[1]; these enormous mole-hills are so numerous that the ground in this part seems to have been gullied by some monstrous subterranean animal.

As far as Gedemgha we floundered along a muddy road. The village is placed on a hill on the north side of the way. At its feet is a grove of old twisted pine trees and secular planes. Through a brilliant rainbow we saw the turquoise-blue dome of the mosque built in honour of the Iman Reza.[2] Close by, a large square is surrounded with caravansaries for the innumerable pilgrims who come to worship that spiritual leader of the Shiite Mussulmans.

Night fell quickly. Still more quickly came a storm

[1] In Persia the canals for carrying water cannot be placed in the open because the sun would quickly dry them up. They are therefore put twelve to fifteen feet below the ground ; but at intervals a "canat" is made, that is, a sort of ventilation shaft which at the same time is used for cleaning. The earth thrown up around the hole forms the small hillock, which repeated endlessly gives the plain its pimpled appearance.

[2] The Iman Reza was the eighth of the twelve imans or spiritual chiefs of Islam. At the age of thirty he succeeded his father, Mussah-el-Kazim, who was killed in Bagdad in 799. Born at Medina in 770, he died at Meshed in 818, and was buried in the mausoleum of Harun al Rashid in accordance with his wish expressed during his life.

which lit up the horizon behind us, while in front of us the full moon rose in an opal cloud. The first drops of rain caught us at the door of the caravansary of Fakhr-Daüd, and we were lucky enough to find shelter before the downpour came.

It was our last night before entering the religious capital of Persia. The stage as far as Sherif-Abad, where the Seïstan road ends, took us the whole of the following morning, and it was under a burning sun that we climbed the slopes of the Sanghi-Best. Our horses were pulling with all their might. After much effort they brought us to the top of the pass[1] which pilgrims recognise from afar by the tall stela which marks it, and Meshed[2] came in sight. From this height the view is wonderful: the sacred mosques with their blue and gilt domes glitter amid the foliage, and you may picture to yourself from your own emotion what a profound impression must be produced on the pilgrims from Bagdad as they come in sight of Meshed after a hundred days' march. They prostrate themselves, piously kiss the stela, raise their grateful hearts to Allah the protector, then, in remembrance of their journey, put up on the very spot where they have prayed little monuments consisting of three

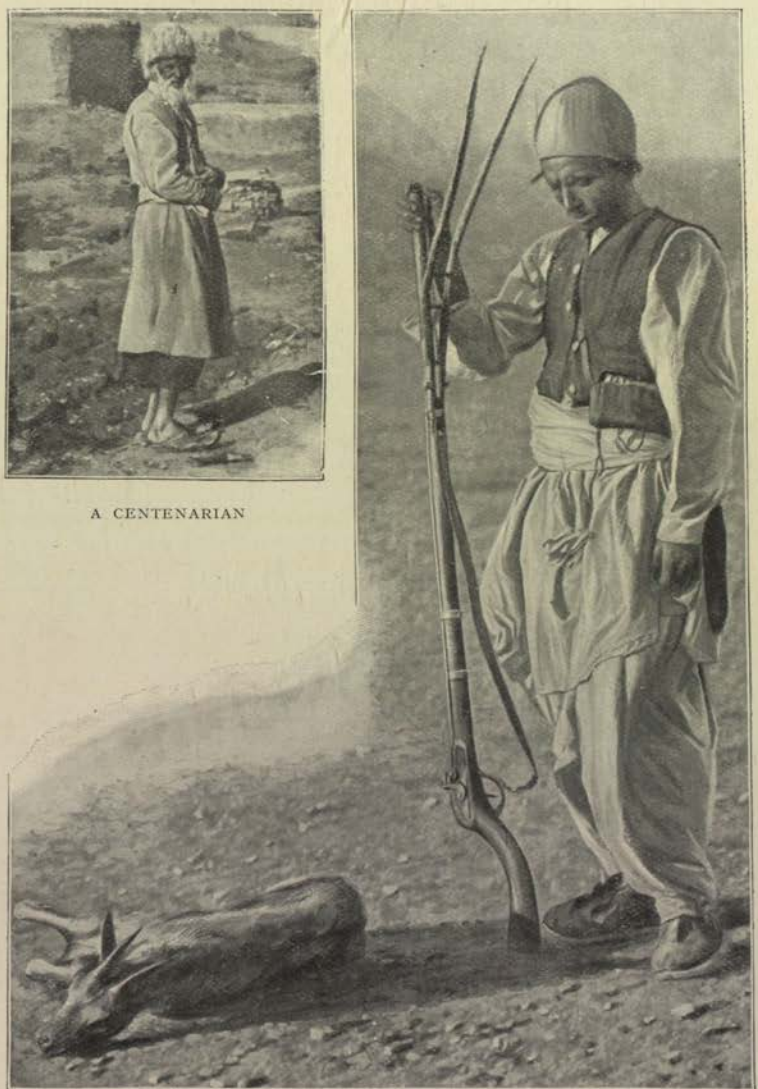
[1] 1,690 metres high.

[2] Meshed contains from 70 to 80,000 inhabitants. There are seventy Europeans, of whom sixty are Russians, which with the Caucasian Mahometans, the Russian Jews, and the Americans, bring the number of Russian subjects to 800 or 1,000. There are about 100 British subjects. The number of pilgrims which every year come to bow the knee at the tomb of Iman is estimated at 30 to 40,000.

stones superposed : thousands of these can be counted on the top of the cliff. On the road leading down to Meshed we went at a rapid pace, the horses increased their speed, and we let them go as if hypnotised ourselves by the sight of that immense oasis from which there rise innumerable the domes and minarets of the capital of Khorassan. Meshed is surrounded by a wall in *pisé*, twenty-two to twenty-five feet high, built, it is said, towards the middle of the sixteenth century. From afar, with its wide moat, this wall of circumvallation seems to constitute a formidable defence, although it is tottering. We passed through a somewhat low gate, flanked by two dismantled towers, and we entered, somewhat at random, and after a succession of winding alleys, on a boulevard planted with big trees, of which the central alley is a muddy stream. We were endeavouring to find the house of Mr. Molitor, director-general of the Customs of Khorassan, for whom I had letters of recommendation from Mr. Naus and from Dr. Schneider, of Teheran. After half-an-hour's walk through sewers and filth we at last discovered his retreat, and were received as friends of long standing. Our first business was to pay a visit to Mr. de Giers, manager of the chief consulate of Russia, where we met the military attaché. We likewise called on Captain Battye, who was taking duty at the British Consulate for Major Sykes, who was on leave.

Next morning we were early afoot to visit the sacred

A CENTENARIAN



THE GAZELLE HUNTER

city. It was, moreover, merely a walk of idle curiosity, for I shall here put down only my personal observations, the capital of Khorassan having been often studied and described. I merely recall the fact that Meshed is the holy city of the Shiite Mussulmans, where the pilgrims, the followers of the prophet Ali, come in crowds to pray before the tomb[1] of the holy Iman Reza. It is sufficient to say that the inhabitants are great fanatics, and that Europeans find little sympathy among them. In spite of this native animosity, the Russians and the English jealously share the honour of introducing into that remote city all the advancements of science. Thus, thanks to the Russians, the mosque is now lighted by electricity, and owes its splendid clock with chimes to English munificence.

We passed through the Bazaar. Unfortunately, the most interesting part of this populous quarter is found within the enclosure of the mosque, that is to say, in the Best,[2] which occupies the fourth part of the town. This "Best" is the quaintest place in the Persian city, for it serves as a refuge for all the ruffians of Khorassan; robbers, assassins, vagabonds, are there protected from all prosecution, and no one has the right to

[1] The building of the cupola, which covers the tomb of the Iman, is attributed to Suri, governor of Nishapur in 1037. Since then the different mosques of the Sanctuary have been often destroyed and rebuilt, so to speak, periodically.

[2] Persian word meaning *refuge*. It is found in all towns of Persia, and it is generally in the mosque.

trouble them as long as they remain there. Properly speaking, it is a town within a town. Life and customs around the mosque are, moreover, very strange; the mullahs have in particular created a special form of marriage for the use of pilgrims: it is a short term union, a contract limited according to the wishes of the contracting party. Bargains can be made with Allah's Heaven, so that pious Mussulmans who come from so far to worship St. Iman find at Meshed docile women whom they officially make their temporary wives during their stay. These companions of easy morals religiously accept their temporary legitimate husbands, and there are some who do not remain more than a week under marital sway. When the pilgrim takes up his staff once more the spouse takes back her liberty—till the next caravan.

That same evening we dined at the Russian consulate. The table was prettily decorated with irises, acacias, and roses, as it had been moreover the previous evening at Captain Battye's; and our return was an exquisite walk through the dark alleys of the town. We were preceded by a soldier carrying an enormous torch. It was moonlight, the nightingales sang in the gardens, music reached our ears over the high walls; there was a kind of intoxication in the air, slighter that evening, and that was, perhaps, the only time during that long journey when I felt the somewhat melancholy regret at not finding on my threshold when I returned the soft welcome of a woman's smile. I

understood the pilgrims and the benevolent indulgence of Allah towards them. But let us close our eyes, let us drive away our dreams. *Boro! boro!*[1] as Abbas would say ... the city is holy, and to-morrow we start for Askhabad.

[1] Go away!

## CHAPTER II

### FROM MESHED TO THE TRANS-ALAÏ

THE pilgrim stones—Kutchan and its earthquakes—the Russo-Persian frontier at Gaüdan—Askhabad—On the railway to Audijan—Caravan organisation at Osh—On the way to the "Roof of the World"—Gulcha—the Taldik pass—The meadows of Alaï—The Kizil-Art pass—First view of the Pamirs.

WE had left the desert. From Meshed to Askhabad we were about to follow—how, I shall say presently—a fairly good carriage road, made by the Russians in 1891 to facilitate commercial exchange between Transcaspia and Khorassan. It is the continuation of the high Iranian plateau which we had not left for 900 kilometres, and we had still to pass over, before reaching the Turkestan railway, a distance of 250 kilometres gradually rising as far as the frontier.

*May 14th.* We left the holy city. Captain Battye, with delicate attention, bade us good-bye in a charming note pinned to a bouquet of roses, and four Indian horsemen from his guard came to escort us as we were getting into our carriage. Our conveyance this time was a kind of immense phaeton where we should be very comfortable—if it did not rain. The practical as well as original way of putting in the horses is curious to note: the two middle horses are attached to the swing-bar exactly as in Europe, but the side horses pull on strong chains that draw the hind

quarters of the carriage, which are often in danger of being left behind on account of the speed and the numerous holes in the road.

As soon as we had passed the gates we met numerous carts, the incessant coming and going of which indicates the important commercial traffic which the Russians have started along this route. A storm caught us at Shan-Kaleh : we had to stop for a short time in a frightful and tiny caravansary already occupied by several Persian families travelling like ourselves. Continuous rain accompanied us as far as Chinaran where we arrived at half-past five in a stream of mud. Fortunately we found a shelter there providing almost every modern comfort ; a table, chairs, and an excellent pilau,[1] which we gulped down with our backs to the roaring stove. We dried ourselves and went to sleep.

*May* 15*th*. The road leading to Kutchan was abominable, a veritable river. It reminded Enselme and myself of our worst days in Manchuria. Abbas, who talked a little, became a subject of conversation for the first time. At a corner of the road a rubbish heap threw him from his seat, and he rolled into a pool of filth. He got up uninjured, indeed, but was severely scolded by the driver who explained to him with many gestures the proper way to keep your seat. His fall sent scampering a crowd of little yellow marmots who were watching us pass sitting on the edge of

[1] Dish of rice mixed with pieces of mutton.

their hole. More were to be seen till we reached Askhabad.

We passed through Seïd-Abad, a large market-town of wretched appearance. The road was cut up, the landscape desolate, not a tree was to be seen on the horizon. To the right and to the left big clouds ran along the mountains.

Wind, rain, storm,—the whole range of bad weather —and no means of getting dried at the caravansary of Mir-Abad, for the chimney refused to draw, and we were smoked out. We gave up the struggle and took refuge in the stables, much more comfortable, where immense braziers were lighted for the horses.

Our old driver awoke us next day at dawn : the sky was dark blue and cloudless. A cool breeze blowing from the north soon dried up the roads.

On we rolled towards Kutchan, across a vast argillaceous plain, where I was surprised to find enormous blocks of stone, almost spherical in shape, the presence of which was inexplicable, and which seemed to have fallen from heaven. Puzzled, I appealed to the intelligence of Abbas, and begged him to give some information respecting such a phenomenon.

" They are stones, Sahib," replied Abbas seriously, " which are going on a pilgrimage to Meshed."

At first I thought he meant to impose upon my credulity, but he had assumed a grave air, affected like every good Mussulman by the religious idea, by the truly wonderful act of faith embodied in a

fact known to everybody. I relate it here to give an idea of the extraordinary fanaticism of this corner of Persia, for he proceeded as follows: "These stones one day left the mountains of Kutchan; like true pilgrims they are scattered at intervals along the way to the holy city, the mute companions of the Persian pilgrims going to Meshed. These stones proceed on their way beside them, for there is not a Mussulman who does not feel a holy joy in helping them in their pious pilgrimage. By hands, by shoulders they are pushed along the good way by pious travellers: those who travel by waggon carry them sometimes for a league; those who go on foot give them what strength they have, and thus little by little, slowly, but surely—sometimes after several years' travelling—the pilgrims of granite arrive at the foot of the walls of Meshed. As soon as one of them has accomplished its pilgrimage, there is heard within the mosque a shout of joy, an indescribable emotion, an extraordinary enthusiasm. A whole people of pilgrims and of zealous mullahs come to meet it. It is welcomed with great pomp, then, amid acclamations, it is rolled piously to the tomb of St. Iman Reza." Is not this an admirable story, giving a colour of truth to the words of Scripture: "Faith shall remove mountains"?

At Zafir-Abab three "goolams" from the Customs awaited us. As soon as the carriage came in sight they got into their saddles and performing at our sides

GORGE IN THE UPPER VALLEY OF THE ATREK BETWEEN ALI-ABAD AND THE RUSSO-PERSIAN FRONTIER

a sort of fantastic caracole, they formed for our modest equipage a brilliant escort with their lively-spirited horses, the silver-plated trappings of which sparkled in the sun. About midday the oasis of Kutchan suddenly appeared on the further side of the gray plain—a long line of trees. No mosques, few storied caravansaries, the town razed like the deck of a ship after a storm. It is the land of earthquakes.

At the gates of the city a clayey ground stopped us. A carriage preceding ours had got stuck in it and barred our way. A stout man was gesticulating among eight or ten women. He gave a cluck betokening fear when he saw us, and like a jealous old cock led his hens some hundred yards away from our foreign moustachios, and made them sit down in a circle on the ground. Then he came back to help his driver. The rescue was a complicated business, but time was pressing. I appealed to the "goolams" who quickly brought to our assistance half a score of natives. These soon made a passage for us by the side of the road, and we started leaving the old bustling cock trampling in the mud surrounded by his impassive hens.

We had a hearty welcome from Mr. Spinella, Director of Customs, whose wife is French. In his company we were now driving towards old Kutchan, twelve kilometres away. On all sides were ruins, heart-rending traces of an important town which for centuries had undergone the terrible upheaval of successive earthquakes. In the space of forty years, three similar

disasters had shaken Kutchan to its foundations. The first in 1852 laid the walls low and opened two thousand graves in the fissured ground. In 1871 there was a fresh falling in of a part of the town. The inhabitants rebuilt the walls, called upon Allah, and took courage. Twenty-two years of quietude gave them confidence, and they thought they were spared. The city became flourishing, active, gay. Suddenly on the 17th of November, 1893, the sky became dark, the thunderbolt burst, the earth upheaved, and in an indescribable chaos the town was engulphed as if by a monstrous wave, and when the unfortunate natives were counted after the disaster the population of twenty thousand inhabitants had been reduced by a half. Those who were left did not, however, yet lose hope, and crowded together into the last habitable corner. Two years later a fourth shock ruined them completely. Henceforth convinced that Kutchan was fated to inevitable destruction, and that Allah was driving his faithful from it, the survivors went and founded a new town ten kilometres further to the east.

We visited the ruins which must contain treasures. A few solitary people live in it, taking advantage of the favour granted them in exemption from taxation. They have armed themselves against earthquakes by building mud huts, of which the timber-work consists of long poplar branches crossed at the top and projecting beyond the ridge. Around the ruins—

BOKHARA—EXECUTIONERS BEFORE THE PRISON DOOR

the only evidence of life in that region of death—grow and flourish vineyards which are the wealth of the country.

On our return we were accompanied by clouds of wild pigeons, the changing plumes of which caught all the brilliancy of a bright setting sun.

In the evening, in the comfortable house of our hosts, I had the good fortune, never before granted me, of hearing the famous tenor Caruso. Unfortunately, it was only in the gramophone. While the docile apparatus breathed out for us a violin solo of Kubelik or a romance of Puccini, I was admiring a splendid white cat purring softly between the paws of a tiger —its grand-uncle—killed near Budjnoord, at the foot of the mountains. The magnificent skin of this uncle was the hospitable corner preferred by this diminutive of the king of the jungle.

The road we took next had gentle gradients. It ascended to a wide plateau and then descended rapidly into a smiling valley. After the large valley of Imam-Guli we passed between two granite cliffs and leaving on the right a hamlet of which the stone cubes cling to the side of the rock, we arrived at the new caravansary of Ali-Abad. Colonel Ali, the owner of the village which he founded, came to settle there with his family in the hope of creating a colony. But no one followed him. The inhabitants were wanting, the hotel was deserted, and we saw the brave fellow in undress sitting all alone on the edge of a moat

watching for the unlikely traveller. He looked at us with an inquisitive and dazed eye.

When night came, while we were recovering from the fatigues of the road, swarms of compassionate frogs awoke the echoes of the solitary garden, and I went to sleep imagining this little oasis peopled with happy couples, to the great satisfaction of its colonel; but my sleep was frequently disturbed by the passing of caravans, and what caught my ear at every moment was the repeated tinkling of the tin boxes which hung from the camels' necks, and in which a mutton bone, striking against the sides to the rhythmical step of the animals, sounded like the far-off noise of a merry chime.

*May 18th.* We penetrated through a very narrow defile into the mountain group which separates Turkestan from Persia, and in which the Atrek takes its rise. We noted old Persian bridges in ruins, and suddenly in a clearing a strange picture: on a meadow dotted with flowers some pilgrims quite naked were drying themselves in the sun. Some were sewing their torn clothes, others were trying to drive away vermin by drawing their tattered shirts through the smoke of a fire of green wood.

We crossed Durb-Adam, Darband, Dash-Arazeh, where women dressed in red and wearing sequins around their heads were cooking bread, busy round the ovens, while chattering like European magpies. Then the road ascended, bordered in places by stunted thuyas, and running close to beds of red tulips; some

THE "REGHISTAN" OR MARKET-PLACE AT BOKHARA

larks chased by rats rose up with a slight cry of fear, the sky becoming blacker and blacker, in which falcons were whirling around. At length, after a long climb and the crossing of a pass, we came out in front of the Persian Custom-house in the small village of Badshgwiran. The three or four versts which separated us from the frontier were rapidly covered, and we found ourselves, after we crossed the watershed, in front of Gaüdan, the Russian Customs-station, where officers examined our baggage in an amiable mood.

We had to find a shelter for the night. Some good Malakans[1] who were occupying the room of an empty inn moved out to make room for us.

From Gaüdan the road, now excellent, descended by numerous and steep windings along the mountain side as far as the large military town of Askhabad.

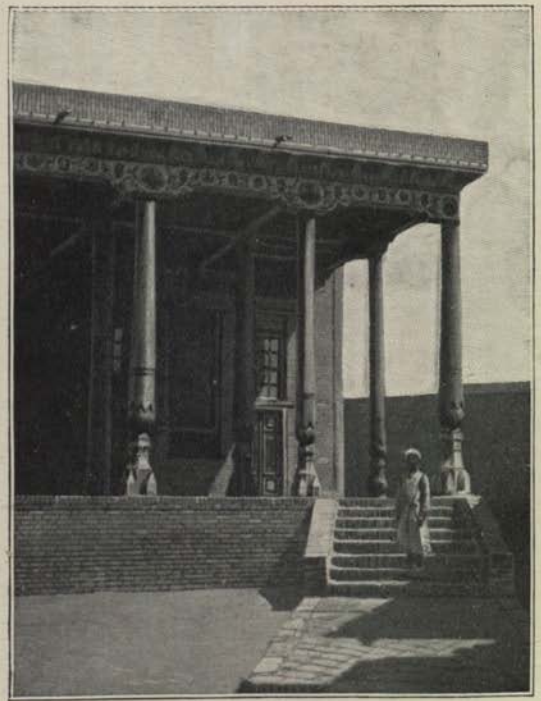
After a two days' halt, filled with visits and Customs formalities, we started on the 21st of May for Andijan, the terminus of the Transcaspian railway.

The railway line which crosses sandy deserts, conducts the traveller towards wonderful oases, towards the witchery of oriental magic. Merely to recall the dazzling visions of Merv with its ancient walls; of Bokhara with its stirring and gaily-coloured bazaars; of Samarkand, the holy city, all blue in a sky of brilliant azure, with its mosques and the tomb of

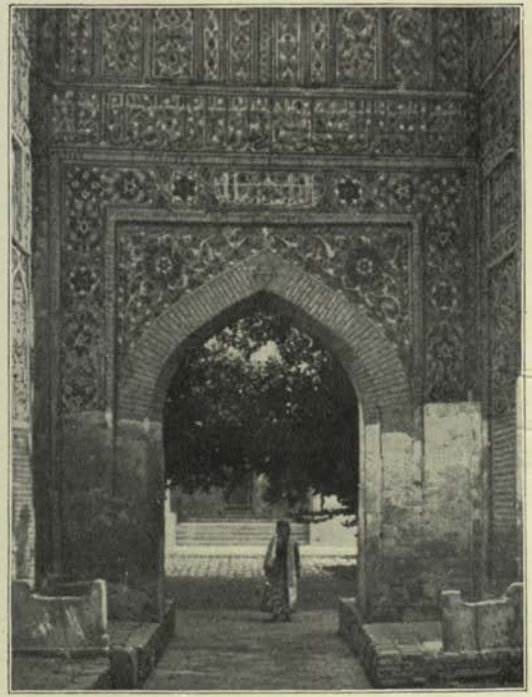
[1] A kind of tribe on the Russian frontier. The Malakans live on milk and vegetables. Banished by the Government to the Turkestan frontier on account of their heresy, they have formed small colonies there, and are all without exception waggon-drivers.

Tamerlane; of Tashkend, the capital of Russian Turkestan; of Kokand, the golden town, with its shining copper, its many-coloured silks, overlooked by the Ameer's palace, writers of all lands and indeed poets have attempted to clothe words and phrases with the adornment of the most high-sounding epithets; they have taken their richest palette to paint the dream and the improbable, but they have only succeeded, however delicate their brush might be, in tarnishing by their touch the bloom of those flashing and unique butterflies pinned to the solitude of the deserts. I shall not, therefore, allow myself to be attracted by descriptions a hundred times repeated and by landscapes so often sketched. Moreover, we were anxious to reach Osh, at the foot of the Pamir, in order to leave civilised countries before the 1st of July, and thus be able to cross the high plateaux in the warmest time of the year. Our halts on the way had no real interest except for ourselves. The only one which is useful to mention is that made at Marghilan where we alighted on the 12th of June to spend a week in organising our caravan which should be completed at Osh.

It was there that we were joined by M. Zabieha, an agent of the Paris firm of Revillon, a Frenchman of Polish origin who, at Bokhara, had kindly offered to accompany me in my expedition. Vigorous, active, intelligent, he pleased me at once. His perfect knowledge of the Russian language, and his qualities of



A MOSQUE AT SAMARKAND



ENTRANCE OF TAMERLANE'S TOMB

endurance and good humour, soon made him a precious travelling companion.

With his help I immediately set about completing our stock of preserves, a great part of which had been purchased at Tashkend, and finding a servant interpreter who could replace Abbas. It would have been indeed uselessly cruel and dangerous to take that good-natured old man further, as he knew neither Russian nor Kirghiz, and especially as he would have been in danger of ending his days in the rocks of the Pamirs or of the Karakorum. Our first care was therefore to thank him and put him comfortably in the train which should take him back to his grand-children. A substitute was not easy to find. Thanks to the chief of police's assistant we were provided with an interpreter, who was both cook and valet, a native of Sarte named Iskandar, who could do everything and everything good-humouredly. You can imagine a tall and strong fellow with bronzed complexion, whose broad smile came through a black beard trimmed to a point. Very talkative, speaking moreover all the languages of Central Asia and Russian slightly, he was the real soul of our caravan.

It remained for us to procure the money necessary for the journey as far as Kashmir, which we did at the Russo-Chinese Bank, and on the 20th of June we reached Andijan, the railway terminus.[1]

[1] One can only go to Osh by driving. The distance is forty-six versts, and there is a relay half way at Khodjabad. The post takes charge of the transport of travellers.

The next day at dawn we resumed our life in a stage-waggon, a kind of large phaeton drawn by four horses similar to the one which brought us from Meshed to Askhabad. It was marvellous weather; the sun tinted with a rosy light the snow-capped peaks of the Alaï; and it was with joy mingled with some emotion that I saw at last rising up before me the fantastic rocky wall behind which was hidden the somewhat mysterious "Roof of the World." What had the unknown of these solitudes in store for us? The morrow would tell us.

Less than a league from Andijan begins a desert of about ten kilometres, a vast plain, burnt by the sun, without grass and without shelter. Fortunately, it was market day, and the desert became animated with its numberless Kirghiz horsemen, wearing the pointed hat, who were going to town in small groups, and of whom some carried across the saddle a long perch on the extremities of which were hanging bags filled with cocoons. Then suddenly came the verdant and bright surprise of a delicious oasis. On all sides were cotton fields, poplars, and rich pasturage. It was one of the charming corners of the upper valley of the Syr Daria that Reclus in *Man and the Earth* has so justly named the "Asiatic Lombardy."

We arrived early at Osh—a little town placed snugly in the greenery at the foot of the Alaï mountains —and as soon as we arrived we went to call upon Colonel Riabkoff, commander of the 10th battalion

THE SHEEP-MARKET AT SAMARKAND

of Rifles who took us in his troïka to the governor of the district, Lieutenant-Colonel Alexeieff. Both, with charming good grace, placed themselves entirely at our disposal to facilitate our preparations for departure, and give us indispensable information.

After several interviews with the officers in garrison at Osh who had already crossed the Pamirs, I settled definitely the route I should follow.

My plan was to reach the Pamirski-Post through the passes of the Taldik, the Kizil-Art, and of Ak-Baïtal, then to ascend the river Ak-Su, to cross the Beïk pass, and thus reach the sources of the Sarikol. On my arrival there I intended to cross the Ili-Su pass, and rejoin the road from Yarkand to Karakorum at the point marked Ak-Tagh on the maps, by following the upper valley of the Raskem-Daria. From Ak-Tagh we should reach Leh in little Tibet by the caravan routes.

I was forbidden, in fact, to penetrate into India by the passes which descend into Chitral or Hunza, and the Government of Calcutta had decided to open to me the difficult and not very direct way from Karakorum. In the Pamirs, on the contrary, I had full liberty of action; General Subotitch, Governor-General of Turkestan, from whom at Tashkend I had received the most friendly welcome, had been good enough to give me *carte blanche* in crossing Russian territory.

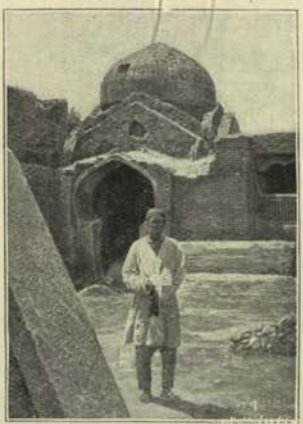
I had still to unpack the camping accoutrements and the arms, to complete the victualling, to find

sure men and strong horses, in short, to organise the caravan which in my mind was to take me to India.

These minute and delicate operations, these important preparations, were greatly facilitated for me by the Russian authorities, who showed so far as we were concerned a cordiality and obligingness I can never forget. Thanks to the good-will and the precious help of each one, the caravan was able to start on the 26th of June, and the next day we took leave of our hosts, saying good-bye for long months to the civilised regions of the world.

*June 27th.* In the court-yard of the barrack, one lodge of which had been reserved for us to arrange our baggage, from early morning there was excitement and noise among the caravaneers, who shouted to each other, hustled each other among the scattered bales, while the twenty horses of the caravan pranced and snorted. We arrived in the midst of this general uproar. It was impossible to make oneself heard. The loading was done and redone ten times over under the quiet and authoritative eye of the caravanbash with whom we had made a contract, and who was there to see that our departure was properly organised.

Gradually, however, calmness and order were obtained, the shouting ceased, all was ready—the moment of departure was near. Colonel Alexeieff came to shake hands with us for the last time, and we started for Gultcha, through the bazaars of the native village. The road, not very picturesque, ascends a wide stony



TOMB AT KOKAND

KOKAND—TOMB AND PALACE OF THE AMEER

valley with here and there only a few sickly groves. At half past three we reached the entrance of the village of Kadurkul. Long-bearded Kirghiz were drawn up in battle array in front of a magnificent *yoort*[1] which was set apart for us, and prostrated themselves with their hands on their hearts. The position was admirably chosen beside a small pond bordered by willows.

Our boxes were brought down and placed in a row. An old Kirghiz, according to the custom of the country presented us with a sheep which we were to accept before he decided to kill it. In a few seconds and without uttering a cry the animal was neatly killed in our honour, and it returned to us in pieces in the large pillau pot. Another native came galloping with a leather bottle full of *koumiss*[2] with which we regaled ourselves.

In the *yoort* after dinner there was suddenly an invasion of frogs, no doubt driven from the pond through curiosity, which came boldly to look at us sleeping. Zabieha drove them away vigorously, and they went back in short jumps not much flattered by their reception.

Our first night of nomadic life passed off remarkably well. It was the reflection of daylight on Iskandar's skull which awoke me. The preparations for departure were rather slow ; we bid good-bye to the Kirghiz

[1] A Kirghiz hut in trellis work covered with broad strips of felt.
[2] Fermented mare's milk.

and started. We followed the bed of a river between two precipitous cliffs in which noisy couples of sparrows were nestling. The Parisian street Arab knows no obstacles. The valley is itself fairly well shut in and winds between high mountains with rounded sides covered with pasturage. We passed close to the refuge of Langar—two houses and three trees—and continuing to ascend the river we arrived at Soot-Bulak[1] before three or four *yoorts* which stood isolated in the plain. Hunger obliged us to encamp.

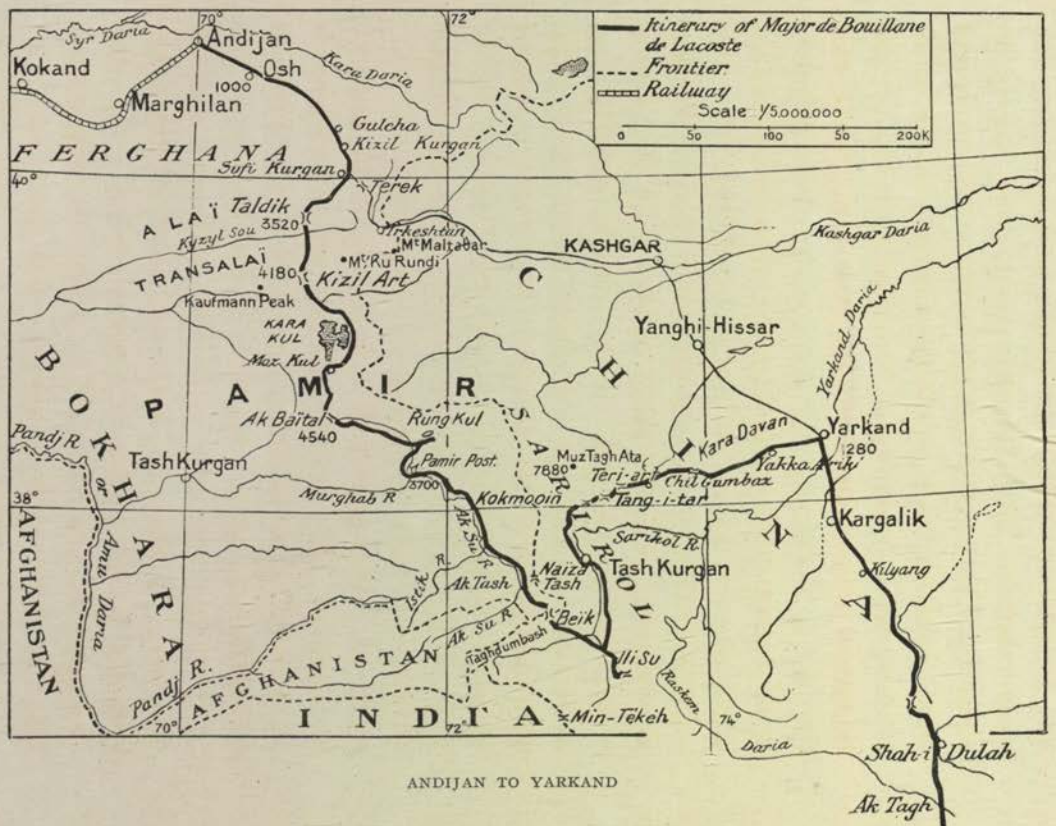
During the preparations we saw passing a Kirghiz family going into the Alaï. At its head marched a compact company consisting of all beings requiring protection—women and children, mares and foals, and camels with their young. Some distance behind followed the group of men who were driving before them with the help of large tawny dogs the restless multitude of oxen and horses.

The sky at sunset had a pink opal tint, but the fine weather did not last and we were awakened in our first sleep by a violent storm which recalled those of Khorassan.

Next day we made an early start. The road crossed the pass of Chigirtik where we reached a height of 2,400 metres. We joined the Kirghiz tribe ; Iskandar, who spoke to the old chief, told me that it came from the village of Aravang to the west of Osh.

The descent towards Gultcha was made through

[1] Height = 1,900 metres.




ANDIJAN TO YARKAND

wild gorges, and the crossing of the ford was not easy. We had water up to the waist ; as for the horses they floundered along stoically, urged from behind by the caravaneers. We left this dangerous place, however, without any accident, and we encamped under some tall poplar trees not far from the Cossack post, the last Russian garrison at the entrance to the Pamirs.

Zabieha and Enselme shot a few pigeons, after which we called on the commander of the fort who invited us to dine the same evening. He was to offer us shortly after by way of concert the deafening hubbub of the trumpet drill.

*June 30th.* Fog and rain. The caravaneers refused to leave the tents. I had to exercise my authority, otherwise I was at their mercy, and who knows afterwards what might have been the result ? I spoke loudly and indeed shook a few shoulders roughly. I was obeyed ; the animals were loaded, and we left in a pelting rain.

The road follows the right bank of the torrent in a very narrow valley, now with rocky, now with grassy sides. Delightful Alpine flowers were growing everywhere. We soon overtook the Kirghiz family whose old chief waited for us with a skin bottle of *koumiss* in his hand. He introduced me to Miss Aï Bala, his daughter, who rode very well on horseback. This young girl looked at me with great curiosity, for I was the first European she had ever set eyes on. But when I asked the age of a young camel, her favourite,

which I pointed out with my finger, Aï Bala thought I wanted to buy it and turned her back on me bursting into tears. A gesture was enough to turn away her heart from me.

We stopped at Kizil-Kurgan, a group of five or six wretched stone cubes built on the edge of the torrent. The Kirghiz family encamped near us. The picture belonged to another age. In the midst of a narrow dale overhung by high blood-coloured cliffs moved about restlessly the motley flock of cattle, servants, and children ; the women dressed in scarlet went and came busily, forming here and there on the delicate green of the meadows, spots as brilliant as poppies or peonies. Carefully fettered by themselves the saddle horses, completely covered by long hoods bordered with red, were caparisoned as for a tourney, and in front of the *yoorts* already prepared, the men wearing their pointed caps talked motionless around the fires while waiting for the hour of prayer.

The next day the caravaneers were ready early. Zabieha rose singing. He furbished up his gun and seemed disposed to want to exchange the traditional mutton for some game or other, however unlikely. "Nor is it to-day that it will speak!" said Iskandar in Russian to our companion touching his sleeve with his finger. Moreover, it was better not to disturb those solitudes where wandered, it seems, a dear princess's soul. During the march the interpreter related to us that beyond the magnificent gorges

KIRGHIZ CHIEF FROM ARAVANG AND OUR INTERPRETER

which we traversed there were at Tigerak, on a plateau which overlooks the river perpendicularly, the ruins of a fort where lived for a long time with all her court a young and handsome Chinese woman, the daughter of the king. Caravaneers in clear nights have seen the diamond star in her hair shine on the top of the fortress.

While Iskandar was delighting us with the story of this legend, Zabieha suddenly fired his rifle and missed a superb sugoor[1] which hissed him as it escaped.

The road crossed the river several times and the fords to be passed were deep and troublesome. A storm came on as we reached the refuge of Sufi-Kurgan,[2] but we found there a roaring stove which dried our garments. In the court-yard was a motley crowd of animated Kirghiz who came to pay the tax,[3] and they were all shouting together under our windows, little pleased, apparently, to have to give their money.

It is at Sufi-Kurgan that the two main roads meet which cross the Pamirs; the one coming from Kashgar through Irkeshtam and Terek-Davan, the other from Pamirski-Post by the Taldik defile. According to the people of the country, caravans are more and more beginning to discard the Terek-Davan road, often blocked up by snow, and go from Sufi-Kurgan to

[1] A large marmot of the colour of an Irish setter.

[2] 2,040 metres high.

[3] A modest sum of five roubles per *yoort*.

Irkeshtam by the Taldik and the upper valley of the Kizil-Su.

*July 2nd.* It rained the whole journey. We passed in front of the encampment of the old Kirghiz whose likeness I am authorised to hand down to posterity with the help of my block notes. Thick mists concealed from us the snowy crests of the Alaï, but the dale was gay with fresh grass dotted with epiceas and red rocks. A white triangle loomed out of the fog; it was the telegraph station of Bussaga, the residence of the superintendent entrusted with inspecting the line from Osh to Irkeshtam.[1] There, again, thanks to the precious influence of Colonel Alexeieff, we found two *yoorts* ready for us. A noble old man did the honours with his faithful yak by his side, and as the evening breeze already blew cold he took off the canopy of our small felt house to enable Iskandar to kindle a bright fire of sweet-smelling epicea. On every side deep valleys opened out, some green, others rocky; and we walked on a carpet of really French turf with its thick tufts of blue, pink and white forget-me-nots. The barometer showed 2,750 metres of altitude, and when the sun set the thermometer fell to zero.

During the night the snow had changed the picture; the morning was remarkably cold and clear. Numerous sugoors were disporting themselves in the snow-covered valley which we entered. Enselme and

[1] The Russians have tried to extend the line to Kashgar but so far without success owing to the opposition of the Chinese.

ERECTION OF OUR YOORTS NEAR THE BUSSAGA TELEGRAPHIC STATION

TALDIK PASS (3,520 METRES)

Zabieha rushed for their guns, and each managed to kill one of these large tawny marmots. Further on at the very foot of the Taldik encamped a tribe with its *yoorts* and flocks. The chief brought us smiling the kalyan of friendship, then we resumed our march upwards over a schistose ground, dotted with patches of snow.

We had now reached the defile, the first undoubtedly of a long series. The altitude was only 3,520 metres, but the gusts which swept the pass quickly forced us to put on our sheep-skins.

After a short halt we again took the road[1] of which hardly any traces remained, and the caravan went tumbling down the rapid slope leading to the Khatin-Art defile. Then it was an easy descent through meadows covered with edelweiss and myosotis to the point called Sari-Tash where there is the bifurcation of the two roads which lead the one to the Pamirs and the other to Kashgar. Around us, not a single dwelling, not even a *yoort*, nothing living anywhere. The atmospheric depression made itself much more severely felt than at Taldik, and the slightest effort put us out of breath. The air, the Kirghiz say, is indeed *heavier* here than on certain summits.

When we awoke the clouds had scattered, and before us the chain of the Trans-Alaï all white appeared in

[1] A notice placed in the defile itself tells that the road was made in 1893 by Colonel Gromstchevsky, who formerly gave me a warm welcome at Port Arthur.

its imposing majesty from the Kaufmann (7,870 metres) to the Maltabar. In the foreground we saw the immense pasture fields of the valley of Kizil-Su where the Kirghiz of the Ferganah come and settle with all their flocks during the two months of the fine season. Yet in vain did I search the plain with my glass; nowhere could I discover a *yoort* or a flock. Iskandar explained this phenomenon for me, and reminded me that the Kirghiz are particularly clever in taking advantage of the slightest undulation to hide their encampments.

The river which we crossed shortly afterwards was at that moment a simple stream of clear water which flowed on a bed of fine gravel; but the width of its bed led us to think that when the snow melts it must form a formidable obstacle. That day we encamped at the very foot of the spurs of the Trans-Alaï at the refuge of Bor-Teppeh.

In one of the rooms of the house where we stopped Iskandar discovered a collection of magnificent horns of the *ovis polii*[1] and of the ibex. It all came from the neighbourhood of Lake Kara-Kul, and the hunting spirit of Zabieha shuddered with joy. We spent an exciting night hunting fantastic moufflons. It was no doubt the atmospheric depression which produced these nightmares.

The next day about midday we reached the

[1] A kind of moufflon which only lives on the plateaux of Central Asia at altitudes above 5,000 metres.

OUR CARAVAN NEAR THE BOR-TEPPEH REFUGE IN THE TRANS-ALAÏ

AÏ-BALA AND HIS FAITHFUL CAMEL

Kizil-Art pass, marked by two *mazars*[1] adorned with yak tails and ibex horns. The barometer showed 4,180 metres.

Our caravan's first stage was now finished. We had crossed without mishaps the parallel chains of the Alaï and the Trans-Alaï. Bright flowery valleys, vast grassy expanses animated by the peaceable life of the Kirghiz, rested our eyes after the fatiguing crossing of the passes, and suddenly almost without transition appeared the sinister entry into the Pamirs.

We stop speaking, and standing in the shelter of our horses, which are panting painfully, and the manes of which are shaken by the wind, we cannot take our dazzled eyes from the spectacle which meets our gaze. Before us lies a cold and dismal solitude. The earth is bare, the sky void. A continuous wind which whistles lugubriously, sweeps everything on its way, and raises in blinding columns a coarse sand which darkens the horizon. Nothing exists, nothing lives. It is the cave of desolation where the heavy air crushes the breast, where the icy wind which strikes against your face seems to repulse you, as if to say: "Thou shalt go no further." Still we must cross, wrestle with the tempest, brave the dust, the cold, the scarcity of water. A long and silent moment of anguish, soon dispelled by the grasp of strong and confident hands! At the further side of that arid and solitary plain is the

[1] A heap of stones covering generally the body of a saint revered by the Kirghiz.

great Lake of Kara-Kul overlooked by glaciers with their eternal snows. With the finger I point out on the map to my companions the point which we are to reach; and as one would cross the threshold of hell we march to life across this desert of death.

## CHAPTER III

### FROM TRANS-ALAÏ TO THE CHINESE FRONTIER

THE Great Kara-Kul—Torta Sin and his dog—Chasing the ibex—Ak-Baïtal pass—Kornei-Tartik—The Stone Lamp—Encampment on the bank of the Rung-Kul—Ahmed steals a horse—Life among the Kirghiz—Arrival at the Pamirski-Post—The valley of Ak-Su—Goat-hunting—In sight of the Chinese frontier.

THE descent from the Kizil-Art pass was effected silently in the wild cold blast which pierced and froze us. In less than an hour we had arrived in the plain, a vast expanse of gray which you see or rather divine now and then through a thick mist of sand. Gust succeeded gust, and I could hardly make my voice reach the caravaneers whom I ordered to pitch the camp on the site of a refuge formerly built by the Russians. There still remained of that provisional construction a few sods of turf which were to be precious to us in keeping the canvas of our tents on the ground, and in preventing it from being carried away by the wind which swept everything mercilessly.

The barometer indicated 3,980 metres. None of us felt mountain sickness, but we were out of breath at the slightest effort, and our faces, fearfully burnt by the sun, began to peel. On the ground here and there lay whitening some fine skeletons of *ovis polii*, whose natural death, frequent enough in these parts, was explained to me by Iskandar. When this large

moufflon of the Pamirs arrives at a great age, its horns assume, it seems, such proportions that a day comes when they prevent the poor animal from reaching with its lips the short scanty grass which grows in these solitudes, so that, weary of useless efforts, it ends by dying of hunger.[1]

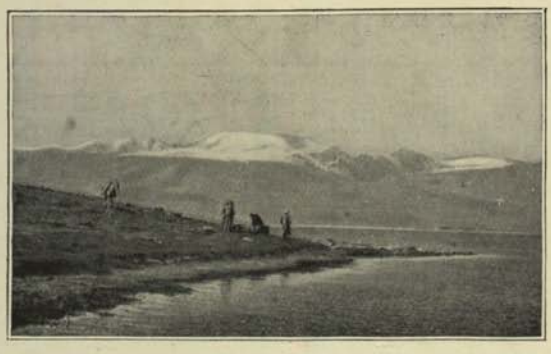
The thermometer did not fall during the night below —4°C, and on awakening, we were rejoiced to find that the sky was pure and that the storm had abated. It was, therefore, with greater confidence that we began our first stage in the Pamirs. In front of us a desert of stones, without a shrub, without a plant, without anything; behind us, the long chain of the Trans-Alaï overlooked by the sparkling dome of the Ku-Rundi. We followed a simple track, hardly visible, which ascended a sandy stairway with colossal steps, and which brought us to the pass of Ooï-Bulak. From this point the view is marvellous. The immense sheet of water of Lake Karakul,[2] after the crossing of these arid plateaux is like an oasis of light, of an almost black blue, bordered on all sides by thousands of points of white, which are the glaciers of the Pamirs. We did not approach them yet however, we had to descend a long pebbly slope to reach the refuge,[3] built

[1] The horns are, in fact, much worn away at the part which touches the ground when the animal browses, which would prove that he only dies after a prolonged struggle against nature.

[2] Black Lake.

[3] The refuges on the Pamirs were built in 1898. There are eight between Osh and the Pamirski-Post, at an average distance of forty versts from one to another.

THE TRANS-ALAÏ AND THE DOME OF THE KU-RUNDI



THE KAUFMANN GROUP SEEN FROM THE BANKS OF THE KARA-KUL

THE KARA-KUL AND THE TRANS-ALAÏ CHAIN

OUR CAMP TO THE SOUTH OF THE KARA-KUL

on the model of that of Bor-Teppeh, and which is about three kilometres from the lake. The altitude was here 3,850 metres.

A black Kirghiz, the guardian of the refuge, received us at the door and introduced Torta-Sin, one of his compatriots, a great hunter, who promised us sport in big game. In spite of his uncongenial face, I engaged this Nimrod of the Pamirs, intending shortly to put him to the test.

While the caravaneers were unloading the horses and putting up the tents I went to the banks of the lake by the shortest road, but this haste brought me a bath of the most disagreeable kind. A short distance away, in fact, the sand sank under my feet, and I disappeared up to the knees in a slimy ground, having taken for a solid dune what was only a marshy soil which the wind had covered with a thin coating of dust. Enselme and Zabieha had followed me, and our coming scattered in all directions bevies of geese and wild ducks which whirled around for a moment in the sky, looking like black spots against the snowy summits, and which alighted, some in the middle of the water, others on a somewhat large yellowish island which you saw towards the west. My intention was to throw bottom lines in order to verify the reports of the explorers who preceded me, and who maintained, like the natives, that Kara-Kul is a dead lake, containing no fish.

The banks, almost everywhere sprinkled with an

efflorescence of nitre, showed no trace of worms or larvæ. I was not discouraged, however, and I threw my lines while Zabieha tasted the water which he found of a saltish, very unpleasant taste.

The thermometer went down to −9°C during the night, and the cold began to bite. We went to take up our lines; the baits were intact. Fresh attempts tried at different points of the lake remained fruitless; there was, therefore, reason to think that the Kirghiz were right, and that the waters of the Kara-Kul were not inhabited. By following the shore we perceived a few white gulls, and started a bevy of wild geese, which made much commotion. It was midday, the storm began,—a daily storm which rises gradually towards midday, and blows without ceasing till midnight, when all becomes calm again.

We returned to camp. In the plain in front of us, sand spouts rose in whirls, some to a great height. The thermometer showed + 40°C in the sun and + 10°C in the shade. That is one of the meteorological phenomena observed in high regions. If a cloud merely passes for an instant across the face of the sun the thermometer falls at once from 20° to 30°. During the night a cold of −9° to −10°C is registered.

We hastened our steps under a leaden sun. Small streams in which flowed a fairly large quantity of water in the morning were now completely dry. The strong sun of midday dries them up before they reach the lake, and they resume their normal course

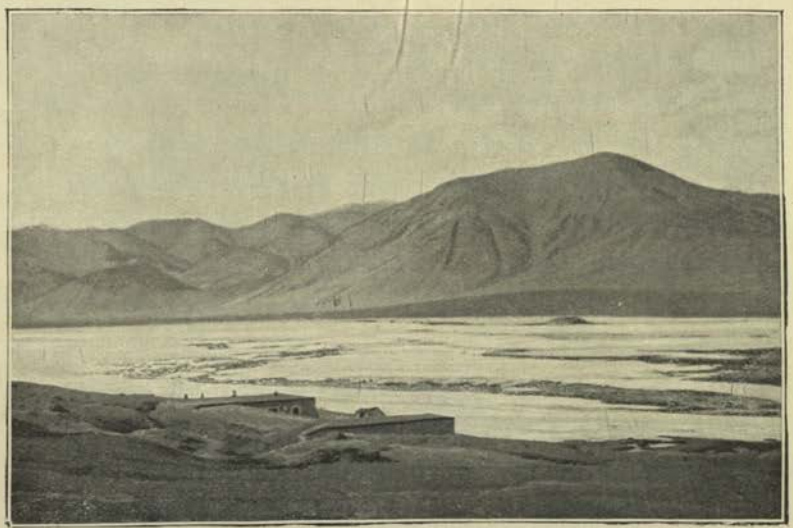
thanks only to the coolness of the nights. The storm detained us till evening in the small vaulted rooms of the refuge, and we took advantage of this to make with Torta-Sin our arrangements for next day's chase.

*July 8th.* We left the refuge on horseback about two o'clock in the morning under the conduct of Torta-Sin and his dog. The man was a big beardless fellow carrying across his saddle the match-lock gun of the Kirghiz, a heavy and strange weapon provided with a long fork used as a support while shooting. As for the dog, he was a kind of big tawny St. Bernard with hirsute coat, with wolf's teeth, an evil look, not too eager apparently to chase the ibex in the mountains. One of the caravaneers, young Ahmed, accompanied us also to hold our horses during the chase.

It was one of those memorable nights in the Pamirs, bright with dazzling stars, in which the moon shone with such lustre that our eyes could scarcely bear the light. We directed our steps rapidly towards the north-east by going up the course of a stream; in less than an hour we had reached the steep slopes which bordered the basin of the Kara-Kul, and now we had to climb along giddy perpendicular cliffs amid the wild jumble of rocks where the horses were every moment in danger of breaking their legs. Everywhere around us lay pell-mell in heaps enormous blocks of smooth granite of fantastic outline, which in the early dawn assumed the appearance of monstrously big animals. At daybreak our guide made

us alight. We laid aside our furs, too heavy for climbing the mountain, and with guns in hand set forth in search of the game. Torta-Sin glided like a serpent among the rocks; suddenly he made a sign; a flock of ibex was grazing below us in a ravine, without suspecting our presence. In spite of a general fusillade, the nimble beasts climbed without accident the rocks in front of us. We had to seek elsewhere. Zabieha was angry at his own want of skill. An hour's walk in fallen stones, at the foot of old moraines, brought to our view, on a crest close to us, a flock of kuldjas (*ovis polii*), which disappeared almost immediately. Torta-Sin rushed forward followed by Enselme and Zabieha. I let them go on, and I posted myself in the hope of shooting an animal as it passed; but in vain. Shortly after I saw my companions return crestfallen and weary, having missed some magnificent animals, they said. Torta-Sin, who remained behind, only returned at midday; he was not more fortunate. The heat was stifling, and, the altitude helping, we had some difficulty in getting down again to the point where our horses remained.

On the morning of the 9th of July the weather was bright and the Kaufmann peak, bathed in a hazy light which toned down its contours, rose majestically in the pure sky like an immense white tent. The glaciers were reflected in unruffled water; the scene was full of beauty. We started definitely this time in a stillness which made breathing difficult. The track



REFUGE AND ICE-LAKE OF MOZ-KUL (4,080 METRES)

THE "STONE LAMP" AND THE SOUTH BANK OF THE RUNG-KUL

followed the shore of Kara-Kul ; it is marked at intervals by "*pylones*," [1] which enable the caravans to find the way when the storm fills the air with that terrible mist of sand almost impenetrable to the sight.

When we reached the end of the lake we took a path which brought us to a meadow covered with nitre in which are a few pools of fresh water. Some Kirghiz were encamped on it, and thanks to them there would be mutton in the menu. Near the tents a somewhat curious ruin attracted my attention : four walls half demolished, but—interesting to note—built of "armed concrete." The concrete is of clay, and the binding consists of the horns of the arkar and the ibex ; it is the principle of present-day buildings, of which our modern engineers are so proud. We went, gun in hand, to explore the lake on this southern side furrowed by lagoons which clearly indicate that this land was formerly covered by water, and that the lake has contracted. These lagoons, which resemble funnels with steep sides, are destined to disappear in consequence of the slow falling-in of their walls; and the approaches of the lake will, undoubtedly, one day show nothing more than a vast extent of hummocky ground. We returned to camp without having had an opportunity to discharge our weapons, admiring southwards the top of the Moz-Kul [2] which the sun at his decline colours with the most wonderful tints.

[1] Mere heaps of stones.
[2] Ice lake.

The night was very cold under the tents although the thermometer only indicated, as it did the previous night, a minimum of – 5°C. To warm ourselves we burned large roots unearthed by the caravaneers, and we kept up the flame by the help of the dry dung of our horses. With this insufficient heat we had to be satisfied, for we had no other fuel since our entry into the Pamirs. Fortunately the sky favoured us; the weather was magnificent. We were still marching towards the south, and followed for eight kilometres a wide valley between arid mountains. A few mazars, ornamented with horns and rags, alone broke the sinister monotony of the landscape: all was black; all was burnt up around us. Here the "Roof of the World" was covered with immense tiles of polished slate which reflected on us, like the walls of a gigantic stove, the heat of a fiery sun. An hour's march through this furnace and the scenery suddenly changed: we were on the banks of a lake of ice furrowed in all directions by wide crevices with emerald-green reflections. Without stopping to admire the novelty of the spectacle, we went round the glacier, and leaving on the left a track which leads to the Rung-Kul,[1] we arrived soon in front of the refuge of Moz-Kul on the west bank of another lake of ice.

The refuge is very well kept, but there were no keepers. In the yard a few fine *ovis* horns, which gave rise to exclamations of joy on the part of Torta-Sin,

[1] Coloured lake.

who started off at once armed with his gun—and his yellow dog. Iskandar followed him with his eyes, and came into the yard muttering words about him which did not seem complimentary, and which Zabieha translated to me laughing :—" That rascal Torta-Sin refuses to work. He has taken his gun to go and sleep in the sun." The cunning Kirghiz returned, empty-handed, only at seven in the evening.

*July 11th.* During the whole morning, we ascended the river Moz-Kul, and towards midday we were at the foot of the Ak-Baïtal defile. Before making the ascent, which bade fair to be a difficult one, we lunched in the shadow of an enormous rock, isolated, unique, which seemed to have been put there in the first ages of the world to serve as a shelter for caravans. An hour and a half after leaving the valley we crossed the Ak-Baïtal.[1] This pass, one of the highest in the Pamirs, separates the basins of the two great lakes, the Kara-Kul which we had just left, and the Rung-Kul towards which we were marching. A real breach, as if cut by the pickaxe of some giant, it opens through a crystalline rock with violet tints, of which the soft colouring is a delight to the eyes.

As I walked rapidly down I heard behind me some noisy exclamations which I suspected were oaths: it was Iskandar furious with himself at having let go my horse, which scampered away towards the caravans already in the plain. The animal fortunately stopped

[1] Altitude = 4,540 metres.

of his own accord to drink at a little stream which flowed on a bed of very large and uniform pebbles; it was the Ak-Baïtal that we would follow as far as Ak-Su. On the right and left of this pebbly plain, bare pyramids formed an intricate maze, and seemed to be dancing an infernal round, and numerous were the "villages" of "sugoors" gathered round beaten paths, where we saw the stampede of the terrified inhabitants. An uninteresting road took us to bivouac at the foot of an immense pyramid called in the country Korneï-Tartik.[1] Our caravanbash pretended that formerly when a Khan returned victorious from war a herald-at-arms ascended up there on the pointed summit to announce with trumpet sound the return of the conqueror to the nomads of the mountain. The corner was cool,[2] a clear brook babbled through it; but there was no wood, and our men were daily obliged to fetch roots from the slopes near the camp.

The evening was, unfortunately, disturbed by the sudden departure of Torta-Sin, who, after a somewhat violent dispute with the caravaneers, took his gun, whistled his dog, and disappeared in the night.

We continued the following day in calm weather to make our way through gorges more and more desolate. The long line of road which unfolds as far as the eye can see discouraged us by its monotony. Animals and men, exhausted by the heat, moved on

[1] Trumpet call.

[2] Altitude = 4,180 metres.

LUNCH IN THE SHADE OF AN ISOLATED ROCK

ENSELME AND ZABIEHA ON THE AK-BAÏTAL PASS (4,540 METRES)

dejectedly across this uniformly gray solitude, and we marched in this way for hours as far as the mazar of Sari-Mollah. The caravans then left the Pamirski-Post road, and, crossing the Ak-Baïtal stream, turned to the east to go towards Rung-Kul.

It was there that we pitched our camp at the south-west extremity of the lake. The water was drinkable. But the wind blew a hurricane in this very exposed place, and the tents which we put up with the greatest difficulty were torn by the violence of the storm. On our right rose a serrated mountain called the "Stone-Lamp"—Chirag-Tash—because every night a light is seen shining on its summit.

This stone is celebrated in all Ferghana, and the pretty legend of its mysterious light was told me by several Russian officers. From the point where we were the little living flame was not visible, but one of the caravaneers, big Ruzi, assured me we could not fail to see it from the spot where we would encamp the following day. In spite of the wind and dust I went to sleep revolving in my mind all the minute details of that wonderful story, and I dreamt of luminous grottos and hidden treasures. My imagination led me even to discover Aladdin, who had taken refuge on the summit of Chirag-Tash, with his famous lamp, and become King of the Pamirs, adored by the Kirghiz.

In the morning the mountains were rose-tinted between the sky and the dark blue lake. We were marching towards the legend. The famous rock rose

before us. "Look, Sahib," said Ruzi to me. I saw at the further end of a black hole a kind of luminous triangle which appeared to be the projection of a ray of sunshine filtered through some invisible fissure. At night the light of the moon must have produced the same effects, and the inexplicable presence of the little flame, almost always scintillating, was sufficient to render sacred that motionless stone in the desert plain.

We encamped a kilometre further on, on a low dune on the edge of the lake. Behind us were the serrated mountains we had noticed the evening before. I went with Enselme to visit two deep caverns, one of which is certainly inhabited in winter; in the vault opened a fairly wide chimney with horizontal passages forming stories. Meanwhile, Zabieha went to see if one could procure a *yoort* and a few sheep from the Kirghiz who, it seemed, had settled some eight versts distant.

Our companion returned towards the end of the day and informed us that he had succeeded in his mission. The Kazi—or judge—of the tribe came shortly afterwards followed by an *aide de camp :* he was a very amiable gentleman of distinguished manners, and with an intelligent air, with whom we had a pleasant conversation while waiting for the promised *yoort.*

In the magic light of sunset at the exquisite moment when the sun about to disappear casts on the nearest mountain something like the glow of a brazier, the

LOADING THE BAGGAGE ON LEAVING KORNEÏ-TARTIK

*yoort* came at last, borne by two magnificent iron-gray camels. The wind had risen as the previous evening; it was already shaking our tents, and under the shuddering canvas we rejoiced at the thought of sleeping in that stout *yoort* with its felt roof.

*July 14th.* On awakening I heard the first crackers of the National Festival. It was Zabieha and Enselme who had gone goose-hunting. The Kazi wished to return our politeness, and wished to take us to lunch at his camp, but at the moment of starting it was found that Zabieha's horse as well as young Ahmed had disappeared. The animal must, no doubt, have gone astray during the night, and the man was looking for him. We were therefore obliged to say good-bye to the chief of Rung-Kul, who, with great kindness, lent us his *yoort* and camels as far as Pamirski-Post.

Suddenly we were taken to a Japanese twilight, a sunset in a citron yellow sky in which light black clouds were scudding along, and against which the dark form of the mountains stood out as if cut out of silk paper. It was a real *Kakemono aquarelle* with a colouring of infinite delicacy.

The numerous attempts at fishing made in the Rung-Kul were as unfruitful as in the Kara-Kul; yet the water of the lake is here less briny, and I was able to gather a few microscopic shrimps as well as little shells.

Our caravaneers were much agitated by the loss of their horse; Ruzi talked of nothing short of returning

to Osh. The storm which blew had as little effect as my arguments in restraining them. Besides, they had to bring back also our other horses which took advantage of too much liberty at night to stray away from camp. The caravanbash and Ruzi therefore began a search. We were beginning to think—Iskandar was of that opinion—that young Ahmed might easily have taken Kirghiz leave astride our best horse.

An honest Kirghiz soon brought us back the wandering beasts; they had taken in Indian file the road to Ak-Baïtal, and, disgusted with the Pamir, were resolutely going towards Osh. It was a failure this time, and dejected, crestfallen, they let themselves be tied, according to the Kirghiz fashion, two by two, and side by side, with the nose of the one touching the tail of another.

During breakfast, Ruzi returned furious. He had found nothing. Our suspicions became definite. We could not, however, remain longer on this inhospitable land, and I induced the caravaneers to strike the tents. As I was about to give the signal for departure a gust of wind caught the *yoort* which collapsed with a terrible noise. We could no longer think of taking it with us, and we were then without shelter reduced again for that night to the frail canvas house.

A fatiguing march: we had constantly to bend down over the necks of our animals in order to face the storm and to try to avoid the sand which blinded us.

THE JIGHIT SENT BY THE COMMANDING OFFICER OF THE PAMIRSKI-POST

OUR CAMP ON THE BANKS OF THE RUNG-KUL

The horses were themselves blown sideways at every moment, and were obliged to stand on all fours to keep from falling. It was in this fashion that, struggling against the storm, our small caravan passed a second time in front of the "Stone Lamp," then by the cemetery of Sari-Mollah, and joined in the valley the road to Pamirski-Post. Zabieha, who had gone before as a scout, came towards us at full speed, swinging his rifle round his head. He had found *yoorts*, and had got one ready for us. The plain, in fact, concealed a Kirghiz encampment; it was Mukur-Chechak-Chi, where we were welcomed in a very cordial way. They helped us to alight, they lit a fire, every one was anxious to wait on us. A tall fair Kirghiz, with a diabolical face, fanned the flame by means of a goat-skin bellows, the end of which was a perfect imitation of a duck's beak, and the roots soon crackled to the stifled *quack, quack*, of the original instrument.

Our arrival made a commotion in the whole tribe, men and beasts; around us in picturesque disorder swarmed horses, dogs, and yaks, fraternising with the children of the nomads. Towards evening the flocks came home. First, in a skipping crowd were the kids and lambs led by a string, then a moment after coming from another part of the plain the flock of dams. It was charming, amid tender calls and repeated bleatings, to see the sheep and the goats looking for their young in the host of animals, and caress them, pleased to find them once more after a

day's separation. The Kirghiz women then came with large pails and sat down to milk the goats, whilst the children mingling with the beasts added their joyous shouts to the bleatings repeated by a never-ending echo. The elder of the tribe, a majestic face with a long gray beard, presided over this ceremony like a patriarch of ancient times. Meanwhile the sun was setting behind the serrated mountains. It was the hour of prayer. The old man stretched out his hand. All noise ceased. The peaceable smiling face of the old man became grave and attentive. He became at that moment of introspection the priest of the tribe, and intoning in the evening calm the sacred song of Islam, he called all his children to the Namaz-gar.[1]

The next day, at daybreak, a courier came strangely accoutred, the bearer of a letter from the commanding officer of the Pamir Post. The letter demanded our papers, otherwise we should not cross the Chinese frontier. We had to bow to this order, and I handed the passport of Colonel Alexeieff to the jighit[2] who rode off immediately.

On the way we were joined by a Kirghiz horseman. What was not our astonishment to recognise Torta-Sin, our hunter from the Kara-Kul. Zabieha paid him the days spent with us and dismissed him. We crossed

[1] The evening prayer.

[2] Kirghiz horsemen in the pay of Russia who carry on the postal service in the Pamir.

THE KIRGHIZ OF MUKUR-CHETCHAK-CHI AROUND OUR KITCHEN IN THE OPEN

the river Pshart, with a very wide bed and very pebbly, then dried up. Shortly afterwards the path bifurcated. A track hardly visible led to the old station, the other which we followed inclined to the right and passed at the foot of a precipitous cliff surmounted by a mazar. As soon as we had gone round the rock I noticed at the foot of a somewhat high mountain some roofs shining in the sun. It was the Pamirski-Post.[1] We then joined the Ak-Su, bordered with green meadows, growing on a whitish saltpetre soil, and by following the right bank of the torrent we came within a few hundred yards of the station.

At that moment I saw two horsemen pass the gate and come towards us. The first was the military commander, the other a Kirghiz interpreter. The captain gave us an excellent welcome, but the conversation was very difficult, for his horse which had not been out for a long time was restive. We alighted: our host took us into clean and comfortable rooms where the mirrors reflected to our astonished eyes the faces of savages, peeling noses, beards unkempt, and brick-coloured cheeks. Fortunately, we should not be asked to dress, nor to display a white neck-tie. The rough broad-shouldered men who accept living in this exile have nothing to remind you of the parade officer.

We were introduced at meal time to the captain's wife; she was the thirteenth woman who had come

[1] The point where the Pamirski-Post is established is called by the natives Shah-Tan or Murgah. Altitude = 3,700 metres.

to live in the Pamir. The twelfth had died there the previous year from heart disease; but our charming hostess did not appear to be superstitious.

The evening was gaily prolonged far into the night. Our arrival was fêted by hunting stories, Kirghiz legends, and Cossack songs sung with a strangely soft rhythm, accompanied by the thin plaintive tones of a *balalaïka*[1] played softly.

*July* 18*th*. Our pleasures continued. We were shown over the station in all its details. Then we had during a long day the story of the hard and monotonous life of the inhabitants of that inhospitable dwelling, a real eagle's nest, beaten by the *bouranes*, where the intense cold of the winter nights freezes the body and benumbs the brain. To bear this existence one must have the special temperament of those northern giants whose stoic endurance we must unreservedly admire.

The following morning on the threshold of the station I found Iskandar, whose face showed he was out of sorts. We had to start, and the men, it seemed, refused to go further. From Pamirski-Post onward was, in fact, for them the unknown, for the caravans never go further than Shah-Djan.[2] Before speaking to the caravaneers I spoke to Captain Busch, and asked him if he could not provide us with a guide as far as the

[1] Kind of mandoline.

[2] A single caravan in July comes from Osh every year to bring provisions to the station, and returns, of course, by the same road.

Chinese frontier. He consented with the best possible grace, and I went to parley then with our Sartes, but the discussions were endless. However, after assuring them that the road was not too bad for the horses, and that we should be guided by a Kirghiz who knew the passes, after reminding them, besides, that they had formally agreed to accompany me to the end and that they might repent it if they did not follow me, I at last obtained the promise that they would not try to go back.

We left the station in company of the two captains and M. Busch, who for the occasion had donned the costume of an Oremburg Cossack. Six or seven versts after Shah-Djan, we passed in front of the Russian cemetery in front of the old station, now demolished, and we arrived a little further on at the *yoorts* of Volosnoïe,[1] where the Kirghiz gave us a good reception.

The *yoort* where we lunched was covered on the inside by carpets and materials in brilliant colours. All around along the wall stood enormous red and green boxes which undoubtedly contained the family riches. Our guide was introduced to us, a venerable-looking man with an energetic face. His name was Rahim-Berdi,[2] and he wore on his breast two large Russian medals.

After lunch, I photographed the group of guests; we embraced, and our caravan started amid cheers.

[1] A Russian word, meaning: *District Chief.*

[2] God-given.

Soon the *yoorts* seemed no more than big white birds in the green of the meadows; the desert began again, sad and desolate. Around us the mountains raised their misty tops, cyclopean domes of a somewhat fantastic appearance, with their strained and architectural forms. Here old dungeons, there winged dragons, further on a monumental staircase guarded by lions. One would say the ruins of an immense town constructed by a people of giants.

When evening came, we encamped at the foot of great rocks which were silhouetted on the sky where the stars were beginning to shine. To the south, some superb glaciers were still visible; to the north, clouds of intense blackness were furrowed by long bluish flashes of lightning.

On the 19th we were in sight of the frontier of China, completely covered with freshly-fallen snow, and still keeping along the Ak-Su, we reached towards midday a point of the river called Bak-Sholdi. In this very grassy corner we erected the *yoort*. Fresh attempts at fishing were this time crowned with success. I took up on the end of my line a few fish of reasonable size; when opened they showed a black inside that was not prepossessing. "Poison,"[1] said our guide laconically.

Our caravan continued the next day its way through a fairly wide plain bordered by high cliffs, fearfully bare.

[1] We had already been warned at Osh of this dangerous property of the Pamir fish.

THE "VOLOSNOÏE" OF SHAH-DJAN, HIS WIFE, AND OUR GUIDE RAHIM-BERDI

Meanwhile, at long intervals, the path approaches and runs along the bank of the Ak-Su, crossing at the same time green meadows studded with small violet flowers. After about fifteen kilomètres, there was at the mouth of the river Istik a " robat " or Kirghiz refuge, half-demolished. The valley from that point became narrow, and the path penetrated a rocky gorge : thirty metres below us flowed the river, in which geese were swimming. Zabieha sent a shot downwards, but the geese had flown out of reach. After this gorge the valley widened into a broad expanse of grass. We put up the *yoort* at an altitude of 3,810 metres, at the confluence of the Dong-Keldik and the Ak-Su in the shelter of a high terrace. The enormous sugar-loaf which bears the name Ak-Tash or " White Stone " was still far away, and yet had been visible for two days.

During the day I caught a strange fish resembling both a trout and a barbel. Iskandar, under the guidance of Zabieha, carefully removed the black poisonous matter, after which he served it up to us *à la maître d'hôtel*, and in everybody's opinion our barbel was excellent.

We were now very anxious to reach the Chinese frontier, and we started early with a cloudy sky and a fresh breeze. The ground of the valley was a real marsh, in which our horses floundered, stuck, and made little progress in spite of the continual shouting of the caravaneers. We suddenly came upon a curious cemetery, the purely white cupolas of which

gave a gay note to the dull landscape. It was, according to Rahim, the Mazar Gudari, overlooked in the distance by the enormous dome of Ak-Tash, also white from freshly-fallen snow. We crossed the river, which descended from the pass of Naïza-Tash (Stone-Bayonet). The landscape was forbidding. Here we were at a cross-roads, a source of considerable terror to caravans, where our road crossed a track frequented by Afghan pillagers who go from Wakan to China. This track leads out of Afghanistan through a deep breach, called Aïk-Yuli, and which is seen to the right and penetrates into Chinese territory by the rocky pass of the " Stone Bayonet " which opens to our left.

At the foot of the precipitous wall of the Ak-Tash, numerous springs come together and form a graceful little lake surrounded by meadows ; it was the Ash-dahar-Kul or Lake of the Serpent. Rahim-Berdi told us that formerly an enormous dragon lived in its waters which devoured all travellers ; but the prophet Ali, seeing the number of his faithful diminish, condescended to trouble himself, and came one day and killed with his own hand that fierce monster of the Pamirs.

The scene changed, and we were then marching through a vast circus[1] bordered on the east by the glaciers of Tagdumbash. After crossing a fairly large river, our caravan spread itself out in a green

[1] In this circus meet three frontier passes which are, beginning at the north, Kara-Kul, Khan-Yuli, and Beïk.

valley where on every side rose white *yoorts* and numerous flocks were grazing. Behind the *yoorts* half-way up the slope stood the pale mazar of Ak-Beït (altitude = 3,870 metres).

We were welcomed on our arrival by the chief of the village, and by all the young Kirghiz on horseback, who executed in our honour an extravagant fantasia. It was the *tamasha*, or Goats' Festival.

This amusement, which seems cruelly savage to our European sensitiveness, proves so fascinating by its novelty and local colour, that one soon gets to have a passionate taste for it, and to forget that a living animal is the cause and victim of it.

A tumultuous crowd, composed especially of women and old men, crowded around horsemen who scanned each other before beginning the contest. The fine animals they rode, trained for this special sport, stood with ears pricked up and quivering with impatience. They brought out a young goat whose horns had not yet grown—in fact, the horns would be too easily caught —and the amusement consisted in catching hold of the animal while passing close to it at full gallop. That was the beginning. Holding on with one hand to the pommel of his saddle, and leaning over so as to graze the ground, the Kirghiz manages to seize the goat. With a swift movement he raises himself up with his prey, which he presses between his leg and the saddle, and goes off at full speed in the plain, going, coming, making many turns and twists to escape

the other players, who pursue him and seek to take from him the unfortunate beast. This first conqueror, excited by the shouts and the encouragement of the crowd, defends his property furiously. The goat, reduced at the end of half-an-hour to the state of a shapeless rag, is taken and re-taken hundreds of times, thrown on the ground, picked up with arm outstretched, torn away brutally.

As soon as one of the runners has caught the goat, he is declared the conqueror, gives up the game and comes to receive the reward at our hands,—a ring, a pair of ear-rings, a handkerchief, a piece of silver.

And when, after much wild racing and many falls, men and horses are exhausted, the game ends, and the horsemen return to their *yoorts*, amid the applause of the onlookers.

*July 22nd.* The caravaneers made a fresh, although unfruitful attempt at leaving us there to go back: but, feeling that their efforts were useless, they submitted grumbling, and we set out at seven o'clock in the morning, accompanied by the chief of the village.

It was on that day we left Ak-Su, and making our way towards the Beïk pass, we climbed a series of terraces overhung by the rocky cone of the Aü-Tash. These slopes are steep. At every moment our brave little horses stopped to take breath, then they started off again courageously, and we climbed very quickly that gigantic staircase. On turning round we saw in the distance a building entirely white: it was

GROUP IN FRONT OF THE YOORT OF THE "VOLOSNOÏE" OF SHAH-DJAN

THE GOAT "TAMASCHA" AMONG THE KIRGHIZ OF AK-BEÏT

the Russian station of Kizil-Robat, where a few Cossacks mounted guard at the very doors of Afghanistan.

We were now on the last tier in sight of a wide valley, in which we were to meet, every five or six kilometres, groups of hospitable *yoorts*. On all sides was a family, peaceable life ; on the edge of the path and on the land were flocks of yaks, sheep and goats herded by little shepherds in tatters.

Gradually, as we advanced, the landscape became sterner. All trace of life disappeared, the mountains took a more and more sombre tint, and towards evening, their walls which overlooked us, came together, forming a narrow defile, into which it seemed as if we should never be able to penetrate.

Our tents were pitched at the very entrance to that sinister gorge. It was our last evening in the solitude of the Pamirs.

We encamped at the foot of the Beïk pass which separated us from China, and to-morrow we should leave " Hell " to enter the Celestial Empire.

# CHAPTER IV

## FROM THE CHINESE FRONTIER TO YARKAND

THE Beïk pass—An improvised passport—Trouble with the caravaneers—Illi-Su—First contact with the Chinese authorities—Tash-Kotrgan—On the way to Yarkand—The pass of Kok-Muinak—Tor-Bashi and the Tang-i-Tar—A Karaül robbed—Arpalik—The infernal gorge—Yarkand.

THE Beïk pass is the most southern of all the passages which enables you to cross the Tagdumbash chain, the high table-land which separates the Pamirs from the valley of the Sarikol. It is in the pass itself that meet the three frontier lines of Russia, China, and Afghanistan.

We were about to enter a country hardly explored, where there was no road marked out to guide our caravan. My intention being, however, as I have said, to reach the high valley of the Raskem by the shortest route, I did not hesitate to take a way that was perhaps more difficult, but at least more interesting even by its novelty.

*July 23rd.* The snow that had fallen during the night covered the ground, a thick fog obscured the atmosphere ; all that did not forebode a very pleasant stage. Very fortunately, the clouds dispersed gradually, and we could start with the hope of crossing the pass in the most favourable conditions. The chief of the Ak-Beït *yoorts* accompanied us for a short

time, then alighted from horseback, and took leave in the Kirghiz fashion. He was the last subject of the Tzar we should see on the way, until our re-entry into Persia by the Seïstan; presently we should undoubtedly become acquainted with the functionaries of the Empire of China.

The slope presented no difficulty. Numerous camels, warmly clad, were grazing around us at liberty; further on, the valley became narrower, and we reached the Beïk pass between two walls of schist covered with snow. A few flocks of ibex appeared on the slopes, but too high, alas! to fire at them with any prospect of success. The passage is a wide expanse; a small lake, partly frozen, occupies the summit; we were at an altitude of 4,700 metres.

If the ascent is easier on the Russian side, the descent into Chinese territory is, on the contrary, perilous; no path exists, you are obliged to tumble down at an angle of 45° among heaps of fallen rock, where the horses are every moment in danger of breaking their necks. Luckily, the caravan reached the bottom of this rapid slope without mishap, and we again met with the Beïk river, which we followed over boulders, on which our horses slipped at every moment. Still there was no trace of a road; no living creature came to animate that valley with its sulphur-coloured sides. It seemed as if we should never reach the end of the stage—the confluence of the Beïk and the Sarikol—where Rahim-Berdi

THE SARIKOLIS OF ILI-SU

MAZAR OF SEÏD-HASSAN

maintained that we should find *yoorts*. However, about five o'clock, when we were in despair, the conical tents appeared at last at a bend of the river ; they raised their cupolas of felt on a narrow grassy slope, overlooked by a gigantic wall of granite.

We soon found ourselves on the left bank of the Sarikol, the roaring waters of which inspired in us only moderate confidence. The inhabitants of the *yoort* had seen us ; they showed us the ford with many gestures. Nevertheless, the river was difficult to ford : our horses lost their footing, and were even swimming now and then. Zabieha, whose mount stumbled, had his boots filled with water.

We had now reached Beïkin-Aüzi[1] safe and sound, and in the *yoort* a clear fire of bines, a new and inestimable thing, quickly dried us. The caravaneers arrived an hour after us, exhausted with the efforts they had to make ; to cheer them up, I bought them a sheep, while Enselme took out of the medicine chest a thapsia plaster, and put it on big Ruzi's chest, who was coughing enough to crack his coarse skin.

But the " Karaül " came to remind us that we were in China : he asked me for my passport which I did not give him, and for a good reason ; he had to be satisfied with a sheet of paper on which I wrote our surnames, Christian names, and titles. I should have been glad to know, moreover, of what use it would be to the mandarin of Tash-Kurgan to whom

[1] Literally : Mouths of the Beïk.

the "jighit" would take the improvised passport that same evening.

*July 24th.* In the clear morning light we were marching northwards, following the right bank of the Sarikol. Here and there, black thorns, wild briars, a few stunted willows, cast their green note on the gray tints of the cobbles, and these shrubs aroused our admiration, for after Taldik we had seen nothing like it. Soon, however, the walls of the gorge stood apart; we came to the foot of a rocky promontory, which overlooked the confluence of the Sarikol and the Khudjer-Ab, and which we were to go round in order to ascend the course of the latter torrent. On the left lay the valley of Tash-Kurgan, covered with mists; in front, the tall chain which separated us from the Raskem-Daria, and towards the south, marking the Indian frontier, the enormous solid mass of the Muz-Tagh.

The caravan halted towards midday, quite close to the mazar of Seïd-Hassan. There, on the banks of the river, stood some wretched *yoorts.* After long negotiations, we obtained from the Kirghiz the use of one for the night, but they hired it with very bad grace, and the women especially gave us the most ill-humoured reception.

During the moving in, I admired the jewels of the young girl of the house, Miss Tavar. The end of her long hair, arranged in innumerable plaits, was bound to a kind of wooden comb, which kept them spread

HALT AT TURLAN-SHAH BEFORE CROSSING THE TASH-KURGAN FORD

out over the whole width of her back. To the comb were attached coins, from which hung, by a black thread, thimbles which knocked against each other with a pleasant tinkling when she walked. She was delighted to receive a pair of ear-rings in white metal. Her mother, an old witch with only one tooth in the centre of her mouth, likewise claimed a present; I gratified her by giving her a ring containing an imitation turquoise, which she put on immediately.

I hoped I had gained the goodwill of our hostess, but I was strangely mistaken. In fact, towards the end of the day, the caravanbash came into the *yoort* and declared that he would not go further, for the upper valley of the Raskem was impossible to follow at this season, on account of the height of the waters. An hour's discussion was not successful in overcoming his obstinacy, but as I hoped to find yaks and carriers at the foot of the Illi-Su, I ordered him to be ready with his horses to follow me the next day. This sudden decision had closely followed a conference of our men with the old witch who, as I learnt later, having taken tea in the caravaneers' tent, had asserted that to penetrate into Raskem was to go to certain death. We were furious at this unfortunate interference, and I had all the difficulty in the world to save the old woman from the hands of Zabieha, who wanted positively to throw her into the river.

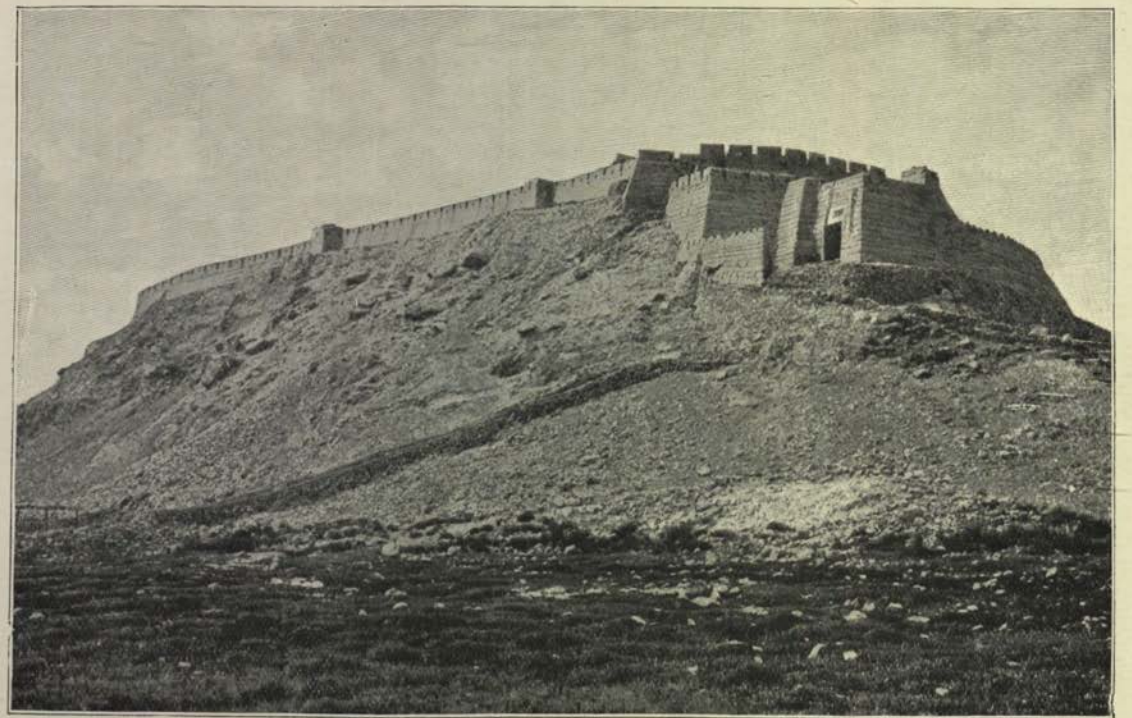
The next day at dawn, the discussions began again with our men, more vehement still than the previous

day. I at last succeeded in getting them to consent, and we started for Illi-Su. After that point arrangements would be uncertain.

The path ascended the Khudjer-Ab, passed in front of the old mazar of Seïd-Hassan, covered as was customary with yaks' tails and ibex' horns, and, running to the south-east, brought us after a twenty kilometres' march into a little grassy valley, overlooked by a few *yoorts*. The barometer marked 4,160 metres ; we were at the foot of the Illi-Su pass.

As soon as we appeared on the plateau, the natives rushed forward to receive us and help us to unload our baggage. They were Sarikolis, Shiite Mussulmans, whose tribe originally came from Wakan ; all were of a pronounced Hebrew type, and disgustingly filthy. My first word was to ask them if they had yaks which could carry my boxes beyond the Illi-Su, but they answered unanimously that they had only female yaks, and that I should not find in the mountain a single man willing to accompany me. Besides, they added, to attempt the route to Upper Raskem at that season would be madness.

I was therefore forced, much against my will, to yield to the caravaneers, and go to Tash-Kurgan, from where I should try to reach Kilyang by the cross road already followed by M. Dauvergne. This decision once taken, I withdrew with Enselme and Zabieha, and we went for a stroll in the neighbourhood of the camp to drive away gloomy thoughts.



THE CHINESE CITADEL OF TASH-KURGAN

On returning to the camp, we remarked a commotion, which betokened something new, and nothing good. Had our men gone away taking with them the caravan horses? Had there been a squabble with the natives? Fortunately, it was nothing serious—it was one of the officers of the Amban[1] of Tash-Kurgan accompanied by two superb horsemen, who came to salute us on the part of his chief. He, too, dissuaded us absolutely from attempting the Raskem, but he proposed that one of us should go and examine the route on the other side of the pass, and if we thought it passable, the Amban would allow us to cross, provided we gave him a written declaration relieving him of all responsibility. After reflection, and to avoid an undoubtedly useless loss of time, we informed him of our intention to start the next day for Tash-Kurgan.

*July 26th.* A monotonous and dreary stage. We passed once more in front of the mazar of Seïd-Hassan in front of the *yoorts*, where the old witch did not fail to show her scorn, and continued our way northwards, following the right bank of the Sarikol as far as the meadows of Chilarik.[2] The representative of the Amban, Kharchan-Beg, at once had a *yoort* got ready, and the Sarikolis being too dilatory for his liking, he fell on them with his *nagaïka*.[3]

[1] Title given in Turkestan to the Chinese mandarins who govern the territory.

[2] Altitude = 3,620 metres.

[3] Kirghiz whip.

Imminent justice here overtook the caravanbash; one of his horses died on the road.

Next day's stage across the pebbles of the Sarikol was irksome: in front of us on the horizon rose the resplendent glaciers of the Muz-Tagh-Ata, or "Father of the Mountains"; while towards the west the jagged wall of the Pamir seemed to wish to scale the heavens. About midday we arrived at the village of Turlan-Shah, situated in the midst of rich cultivated lands, facing Tash-Kurgan, separated from us only by the torrent. Here and there were clumps of willows, surrounded by a wall; we had not seen any trees since Gulcha! We sat down in the shade to have lunch, for the river was difficult to ford and the Beg thought it best to wait for the caravan. The spot was charming, we should have willingly lingered, but our men arrived with the baggage, and we started in their wake. The passage of the ford was not easy; although the river was divided into seven or eight arms, we had much difficulty in crossing on account of the swiftness of the stream and the height of the waters.

On the other side of the Sarikol, we made our way through a wide grassy plain, studded with flowers, which stretched to the foot of the hill, where stood the Chinese fortress of Tash-Kurgan[1] and the Beg conducted us into a fairly comfortable house, built, it appeared, to lodge visitors of note.

[1] Hill of stones—3,150 metres.

THE ASCENT OF THE DEFILE OF KOK-MUÏNAK OVER A TERRIBLE CHAOS OF FALLEN STONES

A FLOCK OF YAKS SUDDENLY APPEARED AND BARRED OUR WAY

Hardly had we settled down when I sent Iskandar to take our visiting cards[1] to the Amban, and to salute him in our name. The mandarin sent back word that he was slightly indisposed that day, but that he should be pleased to receive Our Excellencies the following one. During the day we went to shake hands with the Russian lieutenant in charge of the Cossack station of Tash-Kurgan. He very kindly placed at our disposal the small lodge containing the baths of the detachment, and, needless to say, it was with great delight that we took advantage of his courteous kindness.

*July 29th.* The morning was spent in visiting the outskirts of the village. Tash-Kurgan—in Chinese, Puly—contains seven or eight hundred inhabitants, and its importance is due especially to its strategic position as the meeting-place of numerous roads leading from the Pamir and from India. There the Chinese have a sort of legate as administrator and overseer of the region, the Russians a dozen Cossacks, and the English a native vice-consul, an officer of the Indian army. All these, it seems, live on good terms, although the interests of each are often conflicting.

The village is built on six hills skirting the Sarikol, the highest is crowned by a fortress of imposing aspect, but its mud walls did not seem very strong. It was there that the mandarin lived, whom we were to visit presently. On the other hillocks stood the Russian

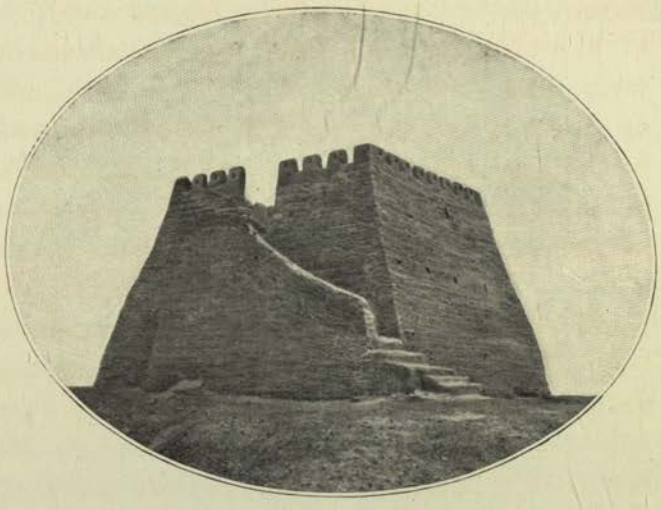
[1] Chinese visiting cards we had kept from our travels in Manchuria.

station, the British Consul's house, and several groups of very wretched dwellings. I was shown ruined walls supposed to have been built by a detachment of the army of Alexander the Great. I saw there traces of recent excavations, which, according to the guide, had led to the discovery of arms and coins of the most curious description. The only thing we ourselves met with, in these remains of a bygone civilisation, was a young hare killed by Anselm.

At midday we got on horseback to go to the Yamen : we were welcomed by a nobleman of delicate appearance, but with an intelligent look, who spoke Russian fluently. It would therefore be easy to talk with him through Zabieha as interpreter.

The Amban, after the customary salutations, assured us of his complete willingness to help us as far as he could. Around him were assembled the principal chiefs of the region, with whom we should discuss the different possible itineraries. The Beg of Tung, a giant of brutish mien, swore by the heads of his ancestors that we should find no means of transport, not a raft to cross the Raskem above Yarkand, and that at that time of the year to cross the river on horseback was impossible. We were therefore obliged to give up the idea of following M. Dauvergne's route, and, whatever it cost, we decided to follow the advice of the natives, and to reach Yarkand by the path which crosses the spurs of the Muz-Tagh-Ata.

The next day our men, after some discussion,



ONE OF THE TOWERS OF YAKKA-ARIK

THE WRETCHED REFUGE OF CHI-CHAG-LIK WHERE WE SLEPT AFTER CROSSING THE KOK-MUÏNAK

purposeless as before, at length consented to load up the baggage, and about eight o'clock we were able to start. At the head marched the *mayor* of Turlan-Shah, who was ordered by the Amban to guide us and watch over our precious persons.

The caravan wound its way between the bazaar shops, passed at the foot of the Chinese fortress, and followed the left bank of the Sarikol in the midst of meadows covered with flowers. When we came to a curious tombstone—Langar Mazar—the Russian officer, who had shown us charming politeness by accompanying us, alighted, and we said good-bye after a cordial shake of the hand, and mutual good wishes.

We soon reached a pretty vale where numerous *yoorts* were erected: the Kirghiz had stretched out on the grass in our honour the finest of their carpets, and we were obliged, in order not to offend them, to sit for a short time, and drink a few bowls of koumiss. But we had to hasten, for the stage would be a long one. A goats'-path ascending among fallen rocks, brought us on a bare stony plateau, where not a blade of grass grows, where the prickly shrubs even do not spring up. In front of us the undulations of the ground diminished slowly up to the bluish platform from which rose in all its majestic whiteness the colossal pyramid of the Muz-Tagh-Ata. There he stood, that "Father of the Mountains," as if suspended between sky and plain, both of an almost similar

blue, reminding one of some immense kite awaiting every evening a fresh breeze in order to resume its flight.

A few kilometres' march over this desert glacis brought us suddenly to the end of a narrow gorge where a torrent came tumbling down from the pass of Kok-Muïnak. In spite of the uninviting aspect of the valley, we attacked it boldly in the hope that the picturesque would come and compensate for the difficulties of the route, but the latter are of the most serious kind. We had not yet found ourselves grappling with such a chaos of fallen rocks, on an unstable ground covered with crevasses and ravines. For several hours our panting horses climbed, while clinging to the rocks with their hoofs, slipped, fell, made a fresh effort, and we were sometimes obliged to support them to help them to get over a difficult place. To crown our misfortune, a flock of yaks coming in the opposite direction, suddenly appeared at the most critical point, and put the caravan in disorder.

Meanwhile, the sun was going down, the wind was freshening, and when we came to the Kok-Muïnak, after that difficult ascent, we were benumbed with cold and exhausted with fatigue. The barometer showed 4,620 metres of altitude. To the right and left were low cliffs of schist on which we saw a few patches of snow. We descended rapidly to a plain of dreary aspect bearing no traces of any human habitation. How should we spend the night? It

ON LEAVING TOR-BASHI OUR BAGGAGE WAS PLACED ON YAKS

was six o'clock, and the fog was coming on. Suddenly, from a cloud there came, like the good genius in the fairy tales, a hideous little old man who, it appeared, nestled not far from there in a den of which he was willing to do us the honours. We got there at seven o'clock, frozen and dying of hunger; a fine fire of argol[1] and an excellent milk soup revived us, but we had to sleep in a horrible hole, the cupola of which had recently fallen in, and in spite of the sheepskins the white frost made us shiver. The name of this delightful place was Chi-Chag-Lik (4,325 metres).

The night had been bad; everyone had suffered from the altitude and the cold. When we started a thin layer of snow covered the ground, but the rays of a clear sun quickly warmed the air. We soon reached the Tor-Bashi pass, and through a wider and less savage valley than that of the previous day, we came down to a group of *yoorts* where we were welcomed in a most amiable fashion. Unfortunately, it would be necessary to spend the day there, for we required yaks to take our baggage to the next stage, and the Kirghiz who went to fetch them in the mountain would not return before sunset.

*August 1st.* The Beg Mollah-Ibrahim was able to collect thirteen yaks, the growling of which set us on foot early, and as soon as the loading was finished, we started for the gorges of the Tang-i-Tar. About four kilometres from Tor-Bashi, the difficulties began,

[1] Yaks' dung.

and we climbed an ancient avalanche with steep slopes, which barred the valley completely. Afterwards we went down to a river of which the waters resounded like a cataract, and following its bed among cascades and rocks, we advanced slowly. The unfortunate yaks were shaken, pushed, thrown against one another, in the midst of whirlpools which splashed and made the pebbly ground so slippery that they could not get a foothold. As for their drivers, they showed remarkable cleverness, leaping from rock to rock with the precision and the agility of a cat. Our guide, Mollah-Ibrahim made himself cheap, and thanks to him we got out of our difficulties without accident. But what a pity it was really that anxiety for our own safety prevented us from leisurely contemplating the scenery, which was very fine! On every side rose, as if sculptured in the stone, porticos, towers, machicolations. There, it was a natural bridge which raised its granite arch to an enormous height. Further, it was a warm spring which gushed from the sides of the rock, sending out thick clouds of vapour in which a multitude of little rainbows quivered. The spectacle was of majestic grandeur, and yet it was with the liveliest satisfaction that we left that terrible Tang-i-Tar, the terror of the few caravans which go during summer from Yarkand to Tash-Kurgan.[1]

[1] During winter the lowness of the waters enables one to follow the valley of the Sarikol constantly.

OUR UNFORTUNATE YAKS IN THE RAPIDS OF THE TANG-I-TAR

The felt roofs of a few *yoorts* were to be seen in the middle of the valley : in one of them we were to take tea, while our men would be unloading the yaks. We said good-bye to that excellent Mollah-Ibrahim who, unhappily would cross the Tang-i-Tar a second time, and as soon as our caravan was ready we began to climb in order to reach the defile of Teri-Art, already visible on the crest of an immense wall of rock. The ascent seemed so long and so difficult that I hesitated to continue, but the caravaneers declared that they could cross the pass that day, and we ascended the gigantic stairs which rose before us. It was pitiful to see the horses, which had to stop often to get breath, and it was after many halts, more frequent as we neared the summit that we at last set foot on the ridge. We were at an altitude of 4,030 metres, and the view was magnificent, but at that moment what did the landscape matter to us ! We had to leave it, and we soon stumbled down its precipitous slopes holding our horses by the bridle.

An agreeable surprise awaited us at the foot of the defile ; in a recess of the ground, two donkey-drivers were preparing to encamp for the night ; they had with them a load of melons and apricots, which we pillaged after showering gold on the owners, amazed at that god-send. Only at nightfall did we reach the mazar of Chil-Gumbaz, whose karaül offered us hospitality in his wretched hut.

Next day, when we started, we experienced the

quite new sensation of crossing a European valley. Our horses advanced among fields of corn and wheat, dotted with poppies; at long intervals flat-roofed cottages lay under the shelter of tall poplars, and goats in hundreds browsed on the slopes. Nevertheless, in spite of all the charm of that nature which we felt was living, the road on account of the stifling heat seemed long, and when, after a march of forty kilometres we arrived at the hamlet of Bagh, the pleasure of everyone was evident.

Behind the house of our host a group of apricot trees threw its beneficent shadow, and we did not resist the pleasure of stretching our limbs on broad, brilliantly-flowered carpets, when we were soon joined by all the important persons in the place. Iskandar did not miss the opportunity to exhibit his skill, and the evening passed agreeably in listening to the words of these handsome old men, while around us the children were picking flowers, and the swallows darting in their rapid zig-zags over a sky of rosy softness.

*August 3rd.* In the narrow valley which our route followed there were numerous trees growing. Having started at early dawn we arrived towards midday in front of a small house surrounded by three large poplar trees, where our guide from Tash-Kurgan, Aül Beg, wished us to sleep that night. In vain did we call and knock repeatedly; the house remained closed, and we were soon certain that its owner was absent. It was necessary, however, to shelter ourselves

COLONNADE OF RED ROCKS IN THE VALLEY OF ARPALIK

IN THE SPURS OF MUZ-TAGH-ATA. VIEW TAKEN FROM KARA-DAVAN AT 2,870 METRES

from a burning sun, and find provisions for lunch; on the advice of Aül-Beg, who took the responsibility, Iskandar standing up in the saddle of his horse scaled the wall of the yard, and from the inside opened its door first. As for the house door we stove it in as discreetly as possible. A moment later our baggage was placed in the karaül's house, a dozen eggs quickly hunted out, and three chickens ready to be put on the spit. Late in the evening, returning from a drive in the mountains our unpremeditated host appeared on the threshold, and in no way surprised to find his house, so to speak, burglared; he merely smiled the philosophical smile of a Chinaman.

Very early in the morning we left the old karaül, after having indemnified him liberally, and we almost at once entered a wild gorge, at the furthest end of which a cascade was rolling. There began the ascent of a rocky wall which the horses took an hour to make. Stumbling again and again under their burdens, they reached the summit, thanks only to some brave Kirghiz who were coming down from the Yamond-Tars or "Bad defile" with a caravan of young donkeys, and who offered to help us of their own accord. We continued to climb amid a scenery becoming more and more gloomy, along a wretched path which led to the Kara-Davan[1] or "Black

[1] 2,870 metres. This pass owes its name to the surrounding mountain, which is entirely composed of schisty slate, which somewhat resembles coal.

Pass." From this point two hours' march brought us afterwards to the Kizil-Davan[1] or "Red Pass," which forms an opening in a heap of rocks of peony colour. The heat was unbearable, and fatigue was beginning to make itself felt; consequently, we decided to halt in the shade of a cliff, and there to wait, while having some refreshment, until the sun had approached the horizon. While we were devouring the third chicken of the karaül of Kaïz, deploring the complete drought of that desert of stones where no spring was purling, we saw two Kirghiz on horseback carrying leather bottles filled with milk. You may imagine with what enthusiasm they were welcomed, and as one piece of good news never comes alone, they informed us that the house of the karaül of Arpalik, the objective of our stage, was only a few gun-shots distant.

The evening was remarkably fine. The sky had donned all its diamonds, and the full moon shone with a dreamy light on the gigantic steeps at the foot of which we were encamping.

*August 5th.* The path descended along the torrent of Arpalik in a rocky defile of the most picturesque kind, where you heard on every side the cry of bevies of partridges. We then entered a valley wider, but quite as desert-like; on the right and left stood like gigantic cathedrals some rocks, so red that one would say they were stained with blood. On the ground,

[1] 3,140 metres.

THE WIFE AND DAUGHTER OF THE KARAÜL OF ARPALIK

enormous blocks in fantastic shapes,—lions, winged dragons, unicorns—strangely peopled the solitude of that infernal gorge. It seemed as if a flock composed of every created animal and fleeing from some dreadful catastrophe, had there become petrified on its march in the early ages of the world.

Thirst seized us in this burning desert, and we were sharing, for want of something better, a water-melon bought on the way from some caravaneers, when we saw in an anfractuosity of the rocky wall a flat-roofed cottage belonging to the karaül of Yalguz-Tograk.[1] We there were received by two Chinamen, one of whom was quite intoxicated with opium. Under the porch some little Celestials, as naked as truth, were playing with a young dog.

The next day Iskandar awoke us before dawn, and we entered from the very outset into a real fog of dust. For nearly fifteen kilometres it was still the same colonnade of blood-red rocks. It was a valley of death ; not a bird, not the smallest green herb. Then came the ascent, by a gentle incline, between the cones of gray sand as far as a pass which opens on a plain of black gravel, flat, dry, fearfully wearisome. We crossed two wide river beds, both dried up, where a few stunted shrubs grew covered with prickles. Nothing was less inviting than this solitary land. There was so much dust in the air that the sun was not visible, and we had to march till we came within

[1] 2,140 metres.

a kilometre of Yakka-Arik before we saw the trees of the oasis.

Two tall pyramidal towers, like mute sentinels, kept watch over the immense plain through which we came. The road passed at their feet, crossed a big torrent by a wooden bridge, and, suddenly, the terror of solitude vanished, the desert ceased: it was for weary eyes the restful joy of fields of maize, and clumps of willows. On the left stood a somewhat strange fortified enclosure, flanked by two turrets with machicolations; further on, the house of the Chinese karaül, where our caravan had stopped.

We visited the fortress. It was an old abandoned station filled with ruined dwellings. At the further end stood the former dwelling of the commanding officer: its walls were still covered with large red placards bearing in Chinese characters the maxims of Confucius, and formulæ to drive away spells. Around the house, immense poplars swayed in the breeze, protecting with their secular shadow a charming jumble of poppies, marigolds and hollyhocks. And in front of those walks overgrown by weeds, in front of those windows closed no doubt for ever, I could not help thinking of the pretty tale of *The Sleeping Beauty of the Woods.*

We ended our walk by a bath in a running stream which refreshed us delightfully. It was the calm hour of evening, the heat was less intense, and the sky of vivid red cast its conflagration-like reflections

A STREET IN YARKAND

on the two tall towers which overlooked us. From where we stood their gray silhouettes seemed crowned with flames ; they reminded one of those Mazdean altars of the time of Zoroaster which the fire-worshippers built in the plains of Iran.

After dinner, the heat was really too unbearable to sleep ; I went to revisit by moonlight the ruins of the Chinese fortress. The oasis was calm ; everything reposed ; on the other side of the river I heard the jackals crying, and in the poplars, which rustled in the evening air, a nightingale dropped the pearly notes of its song. Seated on an old stone bench, I was dreaming of the past, when Iskandar brutally came to recall me to reality by informing me that the caravaneers were starting for Yarkand, and were asking for my orders.

*August 7th.* We arose at sunrise in order to cover before the warm hours of the day the short distance which still separated us from Yarkand. The gray plains and valleys of granite had come to an end. Our little caravan was now making its way amid a green oasis, by shady paths bordered with willows and nettle trees. A village welcomed us at a bend in the road : it was market-day, and the stir in the bazaar, with its men in long tunics, its women veiled in white, its children in many-coloured vests, delighted and amused us. Our horses, accustomed to the great calm of uninhabited places, were somewhat frightened, and we had much difficulty in passing through the noisy crowd without injuring anyone.

Almost at once there came to meet us a magnificent horseman, who alighted and advanced quickly towards me, holding out his dark-skinned hand, in which was a rupee.[1] He was sent by the Hindoo colony of Yarkand which awaited us further on.

In fact, in front of a small caravansary, the harsh sun lit up a group of Indians dressed in white. The oldest came forward and brought me in his turn with a gracefulness quite Oriental, the rupee of acquaintanceship. We promised this handsome old man to return his visit that evening, and continued our way rapidly. About eleven o'clock the gardens in bloom and the cemeteries with their broad stones had become more numerous. A stone bridge was passed, then the high wall of the town, the battlements of which stood out white against the dark blue of the sky : we were in Yarkand. And now came a labyrinth of covered alleys lined with innumerable shops. We halted in front of the mandarin's Yamen ; Aül-Beg, our faithful guide, went into the palace alone, leaving us at the door among prisoners loaded with heavy chains. The neighbourhood was not at all inviting, and we began to find the waiting painful. Fortunately, Aül-Beg returned to remove us from this sorry sight, and to conduct us by the orders of his chief to the dwelling of a rich nobleman, a large

[1] A Hindoo custom which forbids you to approach a superior with empty hands. The rupee is touched by the finger, and the acquaintance is made.

and handsome house in Chinese style, where we were lodged very comfortably.

In the afternoon the Amban sent word that he would receive us next day at half-past three. He sent us a sheep, chickens, rice, maize—and his watch to regulate our own so as to be punctual at the rendezvous. We went out to pay our visit to the Hindoo Aksakal. A nauseous smell of decayed melons filled the whole town, which looks like a plague centre, with its ponds of stagnant water, and its inhabitants with their wan and ghastly faces, of whom many have enormous goitres. Just as we entered under his roof, the chief of the Hindoo colony was meting out justice with a grave and patriarchal air : it was the moment when, all the transactions of the day being ended, people came to have his experience in settling difficult cases. The Aksakal interrupted his duties when we entered, and dismissed all who were present, after which he offered us tea. I returned his kindness by holding out my cigarette case towards his right hand. The old man took one, but as the Hindoo religion not only forbids eating or drinking in a foreigner's house, but even touching with the fingers or lips anything belonging to him, he smoked the cigarette through the narrow opening of his closed hand, without bringing the rice paper near his mouth.

On returning we found the leader of our caravaneers, who had come to be paid off for good, for his men, his animals, and himself were completely exhausted,

and this time, he averred, they would not go further. As we were sure to be able to form a fresh caravan at Yarkand, we did not insist further to induce him to follow us, and I at once paid him the money I owed him, delighted really at getting rid of that uninteresting character. A more disagreeable surprise awaited me the same evening. My travelling companion, Enselme, received a letter from France which obliged him for family reasons to get back to Paris by the shortest route. Zabieha alone remained, but knowing him as I then knew him, I was certain with his help to bring my expedition to a successful end.

The following day, at the appointed hour, we got into the saddle to go to the Amban's. A crowd swarming like vermin circulated in the streets, and on our way we jostled innumerable little donkeys loaded with melons, bricks and trusses of hay. We were received very ceremoniously : the mandarin, dressed in his finest robes, offered us a Gargantuan repast, which the torrid heat would have rather induced us to avoid. But alas ! we had to show courage against evil fortune, and eat conscientiously the twenty or thirty dishes of the menu, while boys in long blue tunics waved rhythmically big fans of vulture plumes.

When we returned late to the tranquillity of our dwelling we felt a genuine joy in stretching ourselves in the courtyard on fine comfortable carpets. The moment was delightful ; in the charm of that declining day I admired the delicate tints of a sky in which the

stars were about to appear. Little by little, the twilight threw its veil over the rosy lights of the sunset; melancholy thoughts passed through my mind. I thought that on the morrow I should no doubt see the departure of an old friend, and I became sad at that approaching separation.

Night had now come completely. A thin crescent moon was rising above the neighbouring mosque, and while the last calls to prayer were dying in the cooler evening air, I seemed already to have a glimpse in a dim Oriental dream of all the magic of that marvellous India which we were going to try to reach on the other side of the mournful solitude of the Karakorum.

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# CHAPTER V

## FROM YARKAND TO THE GLACIERS OF THE SASSER

On the way to Little Tibet—Legend of the goitrous inhabitants of Poskam—Some oases of Chinese Turkestan—The Kilyang Davan —Shah-Dulah—The Sughet Davan—Ak-Tagh—Tibetan antelopes—The Karakorum pass—Story of the comb-seller—Camp of Murgo-Bulak—Brangsa-Sasser.

*August 15th.* We had now been eight days in that unhealthy and unattractive town of Yarkand, detained by the innumerable preparations for a new and long stage. Enselme was already being driven along in a Chinese cart on the road to Kashgar. As for us, who had to take the road to Tibet, we had succeeded not without difficulty in overcoming the ill-will of the Amban, and our caravan, at length organised, was assembled that morning in the courtyard of the Yamen where we were staying.

On the ground, around us, there was a strange accumulation of harness, of tents, of baggage of all kinds, which the muleteers under the guidance of Iskandar were beginning to load leisurely on their little wiry, dumpy horses. With them we were going to travel as far as Leh, and cross amid innumerable difficulties the high chains of the Asiatic diaphragm. On their energy, on their good-will would depend the success of our enterprise, and I surveyed them

curiously, those three big fellows who wore impenetrable masks, and I tried to guess what they would be later in days of depression and wretchedness. But the moment of departure had come: to horse, then, and to Karakorum.

As soon as we left the dark alleys of the town, we made our way through gardens filled with flowers; the sky was limpid, a bright sun shone on the fields; we breathed freely, happy to live because we had resumed the free life of the nomad.

We were soon on the left bank of that famous Raskem-Daria which had already brought us so many vexations: it was a wide impetuous stream of which the crossing would not be of the easiest. A large ferry-boat which was used to ferry caravans was there close to the bank. Men and horses crowded into it pell-mell, and away we drifted quickly, carried like a bit of straw by the wild swiftness of the current. Twice the bark, caught in the eddies formed by the rapids, nearly capsized; fortunately the boatmen kept their heads and we were all landed safe and sound on the opposite shore, more than a kilometre lower down.

A cottage close by offered us its hospitable shade for lunch: the position was charming, among the grass and flowers, and our eyes, weary at the monotony of the solitudes, admired that fine vegetation, those fields of maize and hemp, mingled with poppies, daisies and corn-flowers. The halt ended, we entered

A STREET IN POSKAM-BAZAR

a lane delightfully shaded and bordered by irrigation canals. Everywhere there the water circulated in abundance, but to speak truly it was a muddy unwholesome water, which the natives refused, and to which they preferred the insipid juice of horrible melons very common in the country. Consequently, we met at every step on the pathways of the road many children who sold that kind of water-melon.

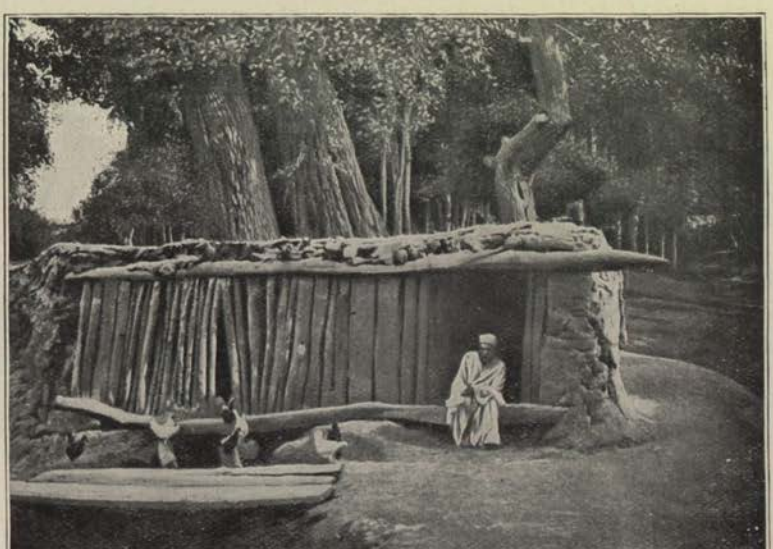
While Iskandar was amusing himself with endless bargaining, a charming scene attracted my attention. Three little girls, dressed in gorgeous robes and wearing on their heads the little Sartian cap which held bunches of geranium on their temples, were sitting under a willow among the hawthorns : they had just given a melon as alms to a poor beggar, all in rags, and it was touching to see this man, almost a centenarian, bow to them with a profound bow as if to three princesses of fairy tales.

In proportion as we advanced, the road became more and more dusty, and when we made our entry into the market-town of Poskam Bazar, our clothing was covered with a thick coating of sand. The guide, which the Amban of Yarkand consented to give us, led us into an antique yamen, preceded by a courtyard in which three gigantic walnut trees threw an exquisite freshness. Very quickly, a few big felt carpets of many coloured designs were spread under the trees. On these the elders of the town came to sit beside us ; and while a little old woman with a cunning face

was busy waiting on us in the calm of that beautiful evening, a noble, with snowy beard, related to us the legend of the goitrous people of Poskam.

" There was once, long, long ago, a very old man who was a saint, and whom everyone revered. He lived in a little shop and made, better than anyone, *chereks*, which are fine Chinese boots of a special shape of which he has left the secret, and which are only made in Poskam. It was thus he earned his living easily, for all the nobles wished to have on their feet those boots which brought luck, they said. Now one day, on the eve of the grand market of Yarkand, the old man, who was sure to meet there all the richest men in the town and elsewhere, filled a large wallet with his finest *chereks*, and went to the field to fetch his faithful camel so that everything should be ready at dawn. Then he said his prayers, and, his soul at peace, fell asleep joyfully. But a sad reality awaited him on awakening. During the night, the camel, the wallet, the boots, all had disappeared. Then the holy man seized with a violent fit of anger, exclaimed :—' Let all who have stolen my *chereks* have henceforth on their necks my camel's hump ! ' This was a terrible wish, coming from an old man who was on such good terms with Allah. And this is so true that his prayer was heard on the spot. Since that time—long, very long ago—the inhabitants of Poskam are all goitrous, for Mahomet, not having been able to find the thief, preferred to

DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF THE JOURNEY, THE HORSES, ON REACHING THE END OF EACH STAGE, ARE PLACED IN A CIRCLE AND MADE TO WALK ROUND FOR AN HOUR



MILL IN THE OASIS OF BORA

strike the whole town rather than disoblige such a good and faithful servant."

*August 16th.* The stage was a very short one; we went by a road still covered with grey dust as far as the village of Yakshambi-Bazar. Iskandar, who found the rooms in the caravansary much too primitive, started to find a more suitable dwelling. A quarter of an hour had not passed when he returned triumphant, having discovered outside the walls a sumptuous dwelling. "It is not far, Sahib," he said, and we followed him into a little path bordered by hawthorns. The midday sun burned fiercely. Already we thought that the interpreter was wrong in taking us so far, but we soon came to a worm-eaten door all blocked up by briars. It opened, and we had then a moment of surprise, of delight even, so strange was the place.

In the middle of a large garden, among the flowers and the marble basins, stood a kiosk of octagonal form, half hidden under climbing roses. Under the cupola, inlaid with the finest porcelain, numerous servants were placing, for our noted persons, rich carpets and cushions of purple silk. And it really seemed to us, in this smiling and sweet setting, that we were carried, as if by a magic wand, to the wonderful land of the Arabian Nights.

The next day we passed through a verdant landscape, dotted with mulberry and willow trees. In the villages there was an amusing swarm of little natives as bare

as worms; we had once again the picturesque scene of the sellers of water-melons, sitting on the edge of the *ariks*, near pretty rustic bridges, with worked railings. Then we entered a lane covered with sand, at the end of which was Kargalik,[1] with its small earth houses and the covered alleys of its bazaar. The Amban, on examining our papers, had us conducted to the mayor's house, and the day was spent in long talks in our host's garden, where grew pell-mell nasturtiums, marigolds, geraniums, and daisies.

*August 18th.* As soon as we left the town, cultivation ceased: we were in the open desert with nothing but sand and little black and white pebbles. The same desolation marked the landscape as far as the little oasis of Beik-Arik, where we were to halt. There was a kind of inn there, the court-yard of which is sheltered by a trellis, and in the shadiest corner a group of caravaneers, with energetic faces, were chatting as they smoked the water-pipe. We sat down quite near on a fine new felt, and we remained thus till twilight, before the kalyans and the microscopic cups of tea, listening to the somewhat wild adventures of these highway travellers.

The next day we had a long stage to travel in a sandy desert to reach the oasis of Bora, where the

[1] Kargalik is an important agricultural centre of six to seven thousand inhabitants, among whom are some fifty Hindoos. It is there that the great caravan road coming from Kashgar bifurcates to go, on one side to Khotan, on the other to India by Kilyang and Karakorum.

YARKAND TO SRINAGAR

willows and giant poplars called forth our admiration. The harvest had just ended; the natives in groups on the threshing-floors were looking after the oxen, which were treading the sheaves. On every side we heard the murmur of cascades, and the purring of the millstones; we were enveloped in a delicious coolness, which charmed us, and made us forget at once the desolate plain we had just traversed.

After dinner, in the yard of our dwelling, Iskandar and Zabieha, who had been put in good humour by the pleasant evening, organised a concert with full orchestra; one played the tambourine on a jam box, the other used plates by way of cymbals, while our caravaneers, carried away by the general high spirits, jumped rather than danced to the rhythm of that barbarous music, and we had in that way altogether the appearance of a band of mountebanks, playing the farce before the show.

The following morning I had the disagreeable sensation of thinking we had returned to the worst conditions we had experienced in crossing the Pamirs. A thick fog of sand, which obscured the air, accompanied us as far as the oasis of Bash-Langar,[1] the end of our stage. There we were joined by an important caravan which was taking quantities of *hashish* to India. Zabieha took advantage of this to have a pipe of the terrible poison, which he smoked, moreover,

[1] *Langar* means halt, place where travellers stop.

without any pleasure, and the only result he obtained was an extraordinary fit of hunger.

The heat was fatiguing, the nights oppressive; since we left Yarkand the thermometer never went below 29°C. On that evening, however, the breeze blew with less heat, and I went early to bed, hoping to have a long sleep. Alas! three pretty kittens, attracted by the ticking of my watch, persisted in wanting to play under my bedclothes, and with Iskandar's help I had to organise a regular hunt to expel the young intruders.

*August 21st.* On leaving the oasis of Sasan, situated ten kilometres to the north of Bash-Langar, we crossed, not without some difficulty, the river Kilyang, swollen by the melted snow, then we ascended the right bank at the foot of the whitish cliffs. Two hours' journey brought us to the village of Kilyang,[1] the streets of which are lined, as at Bora, with gigantic willows.

The Chinese non-commissioned officer, who acted as our guide, was returning next day to Kargalik. Desirous, no doubt, to leave a good impression on us, he organized for the evening a grand ballet with all the stars of the country. At sunset, in fact, there came five or six women, each one uglier than the others, who were going, it appeared, to show us their national dances. The people of the village joined our caravaneers, and were present at the performance.

[1] Altitude = 2,245 metres.

IN THE GORGES BEYOND AK-SHUR OUR MEN HESITATED WHICH ROAD TO TAKE

ON NEARING KILYANG-DAVAN THE YAKS WERE STOPPED TO RELOAD

These motley groups, vaguely lighted by the flickering flame of a few smoky lamps, formed a picture of the most curious description: it was nature's theatre in the desert. The orchestra, composed of a guitar and a large tambour, showed wonderful spirit. During the dance, the spectators, by a custom of which I did not understand the meaning, rose in turn and threw a small coin on the carpet after they had passed their hand over the head of each dancer. But half-an-hour of that show was sufficient for our happiness, and we disbanded the troop, who went to continue their performance in some neighbouring house.

*August 22nd.* As soon as we left Kilyang, we found the road barred by a rocky wall. A turbulent river flowed between two walls of rock jagged and creviced, over which was thrown a rough wooden bridge which we passed in single file. In front rose the mountain with the stony roads on its sides; it meant again, and no doubt for a long time, making our way through ladder-like defiles, high plateaux, and desert plains, towards a mark which vanished before us.

In a lashing rain, and a furious icy-cold wind the caravan reached the hamlet of Ak-Shur,[1] a group of three or four houses lying in a recess of the valley. We were, however, very pleased to find those stone shelters, and we took up our quarters there as well

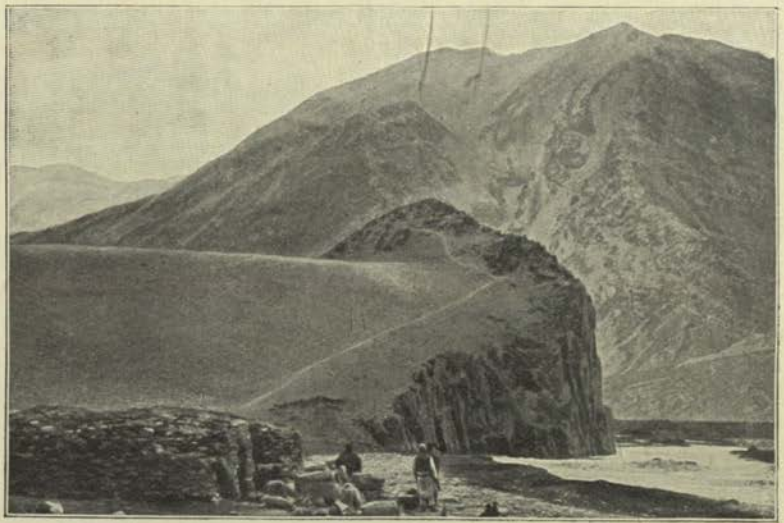
[1] The inhabitants of Ak-Shur are Shiite Mussulmans originally from Wakan. Like the Sarikolis they came to settle in these wild gorges about forty years ago. Altitude = 2,660 metres.

as we could with the help of the Aksakal, who did his best to receive his temporary guests in a worthy manner.

*August 24th.* The previous day's journey had brought us through difficult gorges as far as the confluence of the rivers Kilyang and Liam-Lyung, where we were encamped. We were now ascending the same valley under the conduct of the Aksakal of Ak-Shur, and, by precipitous cliffs, where the horses had much difficulty in finding a footing, we came to the refuge of Chushkun at an altitude of 3,725 metres. But this refuge was in ruin, and offered a very poor protection against the gusts of rain and snow. There being no wood it was with difficulty that we lighted an *argol* fire, and we despaired of being able to warm ourselves when the Aksakal, touched by our troubles, determined to break the law and tore out with his own hands a joist from the timber work already half demolished. We were saved. A fine blaze was soon crackling to comfort and revive the spirits of our men.

The night had been irksome, disturbed by the grunting of the yaks, and the noisy conversation of the caravaneers. At daybreak, we loaded the baggage, and when all was in order we started for the snowy summits, while the Aksakal of Ak-Shur returned alone to his village.

After we started, Iskandar had difficulties with his yak, a superb animal as black as a crow, which,



THE HILL ON THE SUMMIT OF WHICH SHAH-I-DULAH WAS BURIED ON THE BANKS OF THE KARA-KASH

A COUPLE OF TIBETAN ANTELOPES SHOT AT 5,000 METRES OF ALTITUDE

no doubt finding our interpreter rather heavy, tried to throw him, and with that object in view did some exercises of the most comical description. The weather had turned fine. We heard the partridges calling in the neighbouring gorges. Soon we met several bevies, and we indulged in a real massacre: they were birds about the size of a large Guinea fowl, which the natives call *onlars*, and of which the flesh is excellent.

After two hours' easy climbing, along turf-covered ridges, we reached a little lake overlooked by tall rocky walls, sprinkled with snow. By endless zigzags we had to climb a moraine of schist to a ledge covered with ice, where we halted to give rest to the yaks which were puffing and panting laboriously. The barometer marked 4,810 metres: strange to say, this was exactly the height of Mont Blanc. Higher up, there was a fresh stop to reload: the fog concealed the summit of the pass, but to judge by the precautions our men were taking, there must have been some dangerous passage in it. A gust of wind which rent the clouds enabled me to see at my feet a deep coomb filled with the carcasses of horses. In the icy darkness clouds of carrion crows were croaking as they flew, and vultures whirled around by hundreds; it was a real vision of Dante's Hell.

Meanwhile, the loads were ready; we started through glacier-snows where the wretched yaks slipped at every step. After the snows came a crumbling moraine, the

slope of which, almost vertical, overhung the charnel-house just glimpsed at. The horses which were climbing above us sent down avalanches of stones upon us, and seemed to be stopped by some serious difficulty which I could not understand.

I had not long to wait for the solution of the problem. Some shouts made me raise my head, and I saw a horse rolling down the slope just as I was struck by a hail of pebbles. Our horses, frightened by the noise, and by this sudden fall, turned half-round above the abyss, and it was a miracle that Zabieha and myself did not fall into the common grave, to be soon also the prey of large voracious birds whose whirling flight unnerves and fascinates. At last we arrived at the delicate passage, an ice-bank at an angle of 45° which we had to cross on foot to reach the Kilyang Davan. The barometer marked 5,260 metres; a thick fog enveloped us. It was impossible to see further than a yard in front, and the moment was filled with emotion amid that chaos of stones, animals and men, in that sort of cloudy obscurity pierced only by the shouts of the caravaneers, and the desperate trampling of the horses and yaks.

While two men hastened down to the abyss after the unfortunate horse to attempt a very improbable rescue, we descended to the south a rapid slope up to the knees in snow. However, we soon found the moraine again, and by a relatively easy path in less than three quarters of an hour we reached the

THE INTERIOR COURT-YARD OF THE LITTLE CHINESE FORT OF SUGHET-KURGAN

point called Tegarmanlik,[1] where we pitched our camp among enormous pebbles on the edge of a torrent. An hour later our horses arrived; you can imagine our amazement when we found that not one was missing at the muster, and that the unfortunate beast that fell a short time before was accompanying the rest of the caravan. It was there, covered with blood, its hide riddled by many cuts, the right eye gone—a lamentable sight. Our men consoled themselves by saying that on the previous occasion they had lost sixteen horses at the same spot.

*August 28th.* Two days' march in the gorges of the torrent of Tegermanlik had brought us to the banks of the Kara-Kash, amid high cliffs, gloomy and desolate.

On putting my foot outside my tent that morning I saw a good old Kirghiz with a pleasant face helping our men to load the baggage: he was the Yusbashi (chief of a hundred) of the village of Turu-Su, who having had the unfortunate idea to pass that way found himself requisitioned by Iskandar. He was intended to replace, in conducting us to Sha-i-Dulah, the two men of the Aksakal of Ak-Shur, who were going to return home.

We ascended the valley, following the left bank of the Kara-Kash, preceded by the Yusbashi, who, with his skull-cap and his whiskers, resembled a big Norman

[1] 4,260 metres.

peasant ; his horse, as tall as a goat, was the laughing-stock of the caravaneers. The defile soon widened, and the river spread itself out in numerous arms. We took advantage of that to cross it ; then we continued on the right bank until we came opposite to Sha-i-Dulah. We then had to cross the Kara-Kash by a ford so deep that our guide and his miniature pony looked as if they would disappear under the water. In front of us a fortlet[1] raised its ruined walls, while a little further on yak tails and ibex horns, planted on the summit of a hill, marked the site of a mazar famous throughout the whole region.

While our men were arranging our boxes in front of a cottage, where we found a shelter for the night, our Yusbashi, in an amiable mood, came and sat down by the fire, and told us, without much pressing, all the gossip of the valley. According to him, the mazar existed from the most remote times, and covered the tomb of a military chief who had come formerly at the head of an army to fight against the Chinese. It was interesting to know what might be the nationality of this Shah-i-Dulah, and I questioned the Kirghiz.

" Makedon," he answered us.

[1] These are the only traces left of the occupation of the country by the English in 1890. It was, moreover, only temporary, the Chinese having at that time made strong representations to the British Government, and having risen against the violation of territory with great energy.

THE SOURCE OF THE RUSKEM AT THE SPOT CALLED BALTI-BRANGSA

OUR SADDLE HORSES ARRIVE EXHAUSTED AT THE KARAKORUM PASS (5,510 METRES)

He explained then that this warrior came from Mecca; but I remembered that the Sarts, whose language is almost the same as the people of that country, called Alexander the Great Iskandar-Makedon, and I then wondered whether Shah-i-Dulah was not a Macedonian, and consequently one of the generals of Alexander's army.[1]

Whatever may be the case, this mazar is one of the most venerated, and the Kirghiz come in crowds to sacrifice sheep and yaks in order to obtain from the saint the cure of an illness or the protection of their flocks. A rich widow of the country wishing, it was said, to obtain the favour of Shah-i-Dulah in the hope perhaps of finding another husband, had built the little house where we were, in order to allow pilgrims to meditate and pray, sheltered from the storms which often surprise the travellers in these parts. As if to corroborate the stories of the Yusbashi, a violent storm burst on our heads, and we had only time to take shelter, while blessing the noble Kirghiz lady.

*August 29th.* It had rained during a part of the night, and when we got on horseback heavy grey

[1] The thing is not impossible if we admit that in his march to India the great general meant to protect his left by a detachment which, going up the Ferganah valley, would have passed into Kashgaria with the orders to cross the Karakorum and join the principal army towards Atok on the Upper Indus. We have already seen that traces had been found of Alexander's passage, or rather of a part of his army, at Tash-Kurgan, and it is to be noted that the shortest route from this point to reach the Karakorum passes through Shah-i-Dulah.

clouds still hung on the mountain sides. The caravan reached the Chinese fortlet of Sughet-Kurgan[1] at an early hour. An amiable Tibetan old man received us. The dwelling he offered us was clean, and we properly appreciated its relative comfort, knowing that this post was the last stone shelter we should meet till we came to the villages of Little Tibet: a perspective of ten days under tents at an altitude of more than 5,000 metres.

The wind, which blew a hurricane, offered us in the morning the surprise of fine weather, and a bright sun. Our stage was easily accomplished through a narrow valley as far as Bashi-Bulak, where we pitched our camp on fresh green grass, watered in all directions by innumerable little streams. Starting next day, at dawn, we were constantly climbing among big blocks of stone, which rendered the march very difficult. After a halt at the point called Kutass-Djilga,[2] we resumed the ascent, becoming more and more fatiguing. Three of our horses were lame. One of them was in such pain that Zabieha relieved it of the packages it carried, and put them on his own horse, to the great astonishment of the caravaneers. It was more than five o'clock when we at last reached the pass of the Sughet Davan at 5,380 metres. Animals and men were completely exhausted, consequently, we found

[1] The word *sughet* or *sukat* indicates small shrubs of the willow kind which grow in large numbers near the fortlet.

[2] Road of the Yaks.

ourselves forced to encamp not far away on a desert plateau fearfully swept by the storm.

We should have liked to sleep, but the high altitude (5,075 metres) produced so much oppression in everyone that it was impossible to lie down, and we had to spend the night, huddled together crouching round a wretched fire of dung, for we had no more wood, and no roots grew on that ground covered with slates. The horses were suffering still more than we were, and most of them were bleeding at the nose, which reduced their strength still more. It was a real night of wretchedness and suffering which seemed interminable.

*September 1st.* On this date we were to find the Raskem-Daria again, and pass to the point called Ak-Tagh, which I had originally hoped to reach by coming from the west. But the reader will remember my difficulties with the caravaneers at the Ili-Su pass, the impossibility of following that route on account of the height of the waters and the obligation under which I was, much against my will, to ascend as far as Yarkand, while abandoning the Raskem route. We had been travelling since the 25th of July in order to reach this point. At last it was within reach. The landscape was bare and desolate. There was not a drop of water in the bed of the river, which was nevertheless a kilometre in width. Towards the south a group of glaciers showed us the direction of the Karakorum.

We had scarcely passed Ak-Tagh when a superb antelope, with majestic horns, crossed the path in front of us without seeming in any way to be troubled by our presence. Fortunately, I had my rifle suspended to my saddle-bow. "Yours!" exclaimed Zabieha, who first had seen the imprudent animal.

I fired quickly, and hit it on the leg. It staggered at first, then doubled its speed. But, from the trail of blood it left on the sand, Zabieha concluded it was wounded seriously, and galloped off in pursuit. It was a useless run : in spite of its wound, the antelope escaped us.

We encamped that day in the very bed of the Raskem, near a tiny spring which the caravaneers called Darvaz-Sarigut. The water it gave parsimoniously flowed so slowly that we stood nearly half-an-hour with parched throats waiting for the litre of water we required. Yet the spot is much frequented by caravans ; numerous skeletons of horses showed clearly that the unfortunate animals die there very often of fatigue and hunger. Towards evening, the thunder rumbled, and the snow began to fall in big flakes : we were at an altitude of 4,075 metres.

When we awoke, the country was quite white with the snow that had fallen during the night, but the sky was pure, and everything pointed to a fine day. We were still ascending the dried bed of the Raskem. The caravaneers abandoned one of our horses which for some days had been very lame ; he was in a pitiable

THE KIZIL-YAR OR "RED PASS"

plight, and Zabieha, to shorten his sufferings, lodged a ball in his forehead. Poor old servant dead in harness! I could not help turning round several times, and for a long time his dark form remained on the snow, where the blood made an ever-widening stain round the nostrils. Another skeleton to whiten henceforth on the dry pebbles of the plain!

How we should have preferred to see stretched at our feet the graceful and slender body of an antelope! At that time, in fact, some of the latter were to be seen on all sides around us; unfortunately they were much shyer than the first, and fled at our approach. Zabieha, always intrepid, chased them untiringly. Left alone, I gave my horse into Iskandar's care, and I crawled up to the crest of a dale where I had just seen two females. But at that altitude rapid walking made my heart beat so quickly that I was stifling. I had to wait, crouching on the ground until my breathing should become normal, and allow me to aim carefully. Meanwhile, the two antelopes were grazing unsuspectingly. One of them, however, had just raised its head and was sniffing the wind. With my knee on the ground, I put my rifle to my shoulder and fired: at the shot it dropped. The other, surprised, gave a bound, and not knowing on what side danger lay, stopped, on the alert, near the carcass of its companion; two balls made it mine. Then I suddenly saw Iskandar, who had followed me, appear like a hare bounding out of its form. More pleased certainly

than I was, he rushed, knife in hand, towards my two victims, and, uttering shouts of victory, he butchered them according to the Mussulman rites.

When we wished to start, however, the caravan had disappeared from the horizon. What was to be done ? No track was marked on the ground, no indication could put us on the way in that deserted valley, several kilometres wide, where a few antelopes alone were still wandering here and there. Luckily, one of us found the tracks of our animals, and still ascending the dry bed of the Raskem, winding between hills of a brick red, we at last came at night-fall to the camping-ground chosen by our caravaneers.

The spring beside which the tents were pitched was called Balti-Brangsa ; it is one of the sources of that immense Raskem-Daria which we crossed near Yarkand, and which extends majestically as far as the banks of the Lob-Nor. Our lungs were beginning to get more accustomed to the effects of the high altitude we had reached (5,040 metres) ; nevertheless the oppression was still very disagreeable. Had it not been for that almost daily inconvenience, we should have spent here a delicious evening, amid the circus of glaciers which surrounded us, with an incomparably bright moon shedding an infinite variety on that never-to-be-forgotten scene. The sky was of marvellous purity, and some light clouds which ran along the horizon were so clearly outlined, and formed such strange shapes, that they seemed like great

birds of prey hovering in fantastic flight over the mystery of this mournful expanse.

*September 3rd.* I was awakened by the shouts and oaths of the caravaneers. Unnerved undoubtedly by fatigue and the altitude, they were fighting each other with the tent-pegs, and had even taken out their knives. To calm them it required all the influence of Zabieha, who boldly threw himself among them. They separated cursing, and everything pointed to fresh quarrels which would bring about further fighting. We had really no need of this unexpected addition to our troubles, for although the sky was smiling at sunrise, which softly tinged with a faint rosy light the glaciers at the source of the Raskem, the earth presented a much less attractive aspect. Carcasses of horses, skeletons in fantastic attitudes, becoming more numerous as we advanced, marked the track before us.

After about ten kilometres of almost easy road, we came near the slopes of the Karakorum. Quite close to the foot of the pass, a heap of large stones attracted my attention. This was, it seemed, the monument raised by our fellow-countryman Dauvergne, in 1889, to the memory of his friend Dalgleish, assassinated at that spot by an Afghan; I could, unfortunately, not find any trace of the inscription which commemorated the crime. A hundred metres higher up we reached the defile; a mazar, over which floated a rag completely frayed by the storms, marked the

frontier between the Celestial Empire and India. I looked at my barometer ; it marked 5,510 metres. We suffered relatively little from the altitude, but it was not so with the horses, which seemed exhausted, and were bleeding at the nostrils.

At my feet, on a ledge near the pass, an unfortunate camel, abandoned by some caravan, was struggling against some big vultures with bare necks which were waiting for the last breath of the poor animal in order to rush on their prey.

When everyone was safely through the defile, the caravan descended the southern slopes of the group, and pitched the tents on the banks of a stream among white stones where not the smallest plant would grow. Our men, in their turn, were downcast, and suffered from violent headache. It was a moral, perhaps, rather than a physical impression which discouraged them, for the spot where we were, which was called Chudjaz-Djilga,[1] had a very bad reputation among them. It is haunted, it seems, by an evil genius which *prevents water from boiling*, and when, after night-fall, we were assembled around the argol fire, Yussuf, one of the caravaneers, told us the story of the comb-merchant and the kettle.

" He was an old Hindoo, who was going to Yarkand to sell several bales of wooden combs, such as are made in the upper valley of the Indus. He stopped one evening on the banks of this same stream, and having

[1] 5,225 metres high. *Chudjaz* means kettle and *djilga* road.

once filled his kettle, he tried to kindle the small quantity of wood which he still possessed. In vain he struck the tinder-box; the wood, which had no doubt got wet in crossing some ford, refused to catch fire. What was he to do? Our man scratched his ear and looked around him; there were neither roots of plants, nor horse-dung to feed the flames; the combs alone which were of wood would certainly make a fine blaze, and the kettle would sing, and the old man would take his tea. Yet to burn merchandise was to throw rupees in the fire. Love of nice things, and perhaps, too, the necessity of not dying of hunger and thirst, prevailed over avarice. Two combs crackled on the coals, then four, and the kettle did not sing. The Hindoo put aside the pretty combs with ornamental illumination, and burned a dozen of little value. He saw pointed teeth writhing as they caught the flame, but he saw no water boiling. Then, in a fit of anger, the merchant, who had missed many things in his life except his tea, sacrificed all his collection, and even the rarest pieces ornamented with verses from the Koran. Alas! the water remained motionless, and the *chudjaz* gave forth no sound, so that on the following morning a passing caravan found the old Hindoo stretched lifeless near his kettle, and it was thought he had died of rage, because, like his combs, he was showing his teeth."

Thereupon the brave Yussuf, tired of having related so much, guzzled down a last bowl of tea, and

rolled himself in his blanket, wishing us a pleasant night.

*September 4th.* We passed near a group of three tombs constructed of uncemented stones. According to the caravaneers there was buried in this spot, called Tash-Gumbaz, a "padisha," or general, who had come from Rome centuries before with 500 soldiers. What was the explanation of that story ? Was it the tomb of a companion in arms of Shah-i-Dulah ? Impossible to solve the mystery ! I could obtain nothing more from our men except that they would show me next day the site where that "padisha" had pitched his camp.

A few kilometres beyond Tash-Gumbaz, we crossed the river called Chipchak; then we climbed a stairs with gigantic steps to reach the immense plateau of Dapsang, which has a mean altitude of 5,250 metres.

We crossed from north to south for four long hours that weary plain the ground of which is covered with little black and white pointed pebbles. Before us rose as a pleasant break in the monotony of the landscape, the immense and grandiose chain of the glaciers of the Sasser, of which the peaks of dazzling whiteness rose to more than 7,000 metres. Towards evening, we at length reached the edge of the plateau, and by a rapid descent we came into a most curious gorge. Its sides were red, blood-coloured, and the river in which our horses floundered seemed to come from some fantastic slaughter-house. This defile is called

THE TENTS WERE PITCHED ON THE SITE OF THE ANCIENT CAMP OF MURGO-BULAK

the Kizil-Yar or the "Red defile." We marched in the very bed of the torrent for several kilometres, and when night came we encamped in the hollow of a rock, a veritable repair of wild beasts overhung on every side by high vertical walls.

Our bodies were really fatigued, our brains weary of that succession of stages through absolutely desert regions. The horses, which had not seen grass for four days, rushed at the few tufts of moss growing on the edge of the road, or greedily devoured the dung of their companions. We were compelled to deny them that precious commodity which had been our only fuel for a week, and we were forced that evening to sacrifice a few tent-pegs to enable us to cook a quarter of antelope.

*September 5th.* This was a difficult day's march through deep and tortuous gorges. To the right and to the left the mountain range shot up peaks like so many arrows towards the azure sky. Lower down came a wild jumble of rocks, stony ravines, enormous waves of sand which overlapped and mingled —a scene of terrible picturesqueness which seemed to have been painted for some gigantic race that had disappeared.

Towards evening we climbed along an almost vertical wall, and by a path running under a rocky cornice we came to a ledge where the caravaneers pitched the tents. This was Murgo-Bulak[1] where

[1] Altitude = 4,600 metres.

tradition asserts that the Padisha, buried at Tash-Gumbaz formerly placed an entrenched camp. It must be confessed that the position was admirably chosen. An abundant spring gushed out of the centre of the plateau, and the ground of the camp itself was as well rammed and as horizontal as a tennis court. There were still to be seen the ruins of a wall built of uncemented stones, which, bordering the ledge on the north—that is to say, on the China side—helped to make the position stronger.

From defile to defile we came next day after a long stage to the banks of a wide river with muddy waters. It was the terrible Shayok, the terror of caravans. I was wondering in what way we could cross it, when I saw coming towards us three natives who went into the rapids supporting themselves on long sticks. The water sometimes seemed to cover them completely, but with admirable skill they succeeded in joining us. Putting themselves at the head, they led us without hesitation by a winding ford which by ourselves we could not have marked out, and, in spite of the swiftness of the current, they brought us without accident to the opposite shore.

We soon arrived at Brangsa-Sasser[1] at the very foot of the Sasser-La which we would try to pass the next day. Seen from that spot, their chaotic points, their immense crevasses, with bluish reflections, seemed impassable, but the caravaneers

[1] A ruined refuge of 4,635 metres of altitude.

OLD BLIND BEGGAR AT YARKAND

HALT ON THE BANKS OF THE SHAYOK, BEFORE CROSSING THE FORD

pretended that if the genii who lived in these sinister places were favourable to us, and kept us from avalanches, we should have passed over the most difficult places before sunset. "Allah is great," they said, "and in two days we shall reach the first villages in Tibet."

# CHAPTER VI

## THROUGH LITTLE TIBET AND KASHMERE

On the glaciers of the Sasser—The Valley of the Nubra—Our first halt among the Tibetans—Panamik and its white *chortens*—Prayer-mills—The pass of Khardong in a storm—Arrival in the capital of Little Tibet—A Lama monastery—The bungalows of the Upper Indus—Kashgar landscapes—Srinagar the Venice of India—On the way to Baluchistan.

THE crossing of the Sasser-La bade fair to be an arduous one. Luckily, the sky which I scanned on awakening was wonderfully clear, and the atmosphere seemed undisturbed. We might, therefore, hope to cross in the most favourable conditions that ocean of ice of which the giant waves were already shining up there in the rays of the rising sun.

Three hours' difficult march through fallen stones brought us to the very foot of the pass. The real difficulties then began with the ascent of the frontal moraine, the stones of which, mingled with a yellowish mud, fell away every moment under the horses' feet. At the summit of this escarpment we found the glacier which brought us to the pass[1] by an almost imperceptible slope.

Everything around us was white: the full midday sun shed its dazzling light on that vast expanse of snow, but likewise melted the ice, and we sunk to

[1] Altitude = 5,365 metres. *La* in Tibetan, like *Davan* in Kirghiz, means pass or passage.

the knees in a kind of sherbet without consistency, trampling heavily like ducks floundering in a pond.

We had now reached the further side of the pass, descending the rapid slope of the glacier-snow. Crevasses succeeded crevasses, and to crown our misfortunes, we had an overhanging rocky wall creviced to its base, from which avalanches came rolling down with a crash, and frightening our animals.

There, as in the desert, carcasses of animals strewed the way. Some, fetid carcasses that had fallen shortly before, seemed to be sleeping in almost natural attitudes; others, which had perhaps been abandoned years ago, were mummified in the most whimsical positions, perched on columns of ice, and looking here and there like big fantastic mushrooms.[1]

For four hours we struggled against difficulties of all kinds. Our men were really extraordinary. Aided by Iskandar and two Tibetans hired for the occasion, they performed their hard task with a pluck which called forth my admiration, raising the horses, fetching the baggage from the bottom of a crevasse, loading them up again without a murmur, thanks to that grand and quiet way they have in their continual struggle with the elements.

The ascent of the pass had begun at eight in the morning, and it was three in the afternoon when we were at length clear of the glaciers. A descent of a

[1] The well-known phenomenon of *glacier-tables*.

NATURE OF THE GROUND AT THE SASSER-LA (5,365 METRES)

TAGHAR—THE TEMPLE WITH THE PRAYER-MILL

few more kilometres through enormous blocks of granite brought us to a spring in a vale called Tuti-Yalak[1] clothed with a beautiful green grass, and close by we pitched our tents. Men and beasts had well earned their rest. The next day, *Inshallah*, we should see the first Tibetan villages.

*September 8th.* In brilliant sunshine we broke up camp early, and descended the grassy slopes, overjoyed at having been able to cross the Sasser without a mishap. On the right opened a deep valley coming from the north; it was the great Remo glacier, one of the vastest in the world, which extended its gigantic waves right up to where we were, and reminded me of Chamonix, and our Mer de Glace, a mere Alpine plaything compared with this colossus. Further on a new road[2] made entirely in the granite, wound like a monstrous serpent now up, now down, then rose again to redescend once more amidst the giddy heights, and brought us to the banks of the Nubra.

Facing us was a green oasis suspended on the mountain side. This was Arena, of which the funeral pyramids stood out white against the dark foliage of the trees. On our bank we had still the desert with its pebbles, and its high wall of granite, and we had a long march before we came among trees and meadows. We were then in the Tibetan village of

[1] Altitude = 4,795 metres.

[2] This road, made by British officers, enables the traveller to avoid the pass of the Karaül-Davan, and thus shorten the stage from Tuti-Yalak to Spango.

Spango, where a household of kind old men offered us hospitality, and welcomed us by putting out their tongues, which is here the form of polite salutation.

It was the first time I entered a Tibetan house; everything was therefore new and instructive to me. On the ground floor were the stables; on the first floor, the rooms, the kitchen and cellar. In front of the entrance a long pole bore on its end a narrow strip of white linen on which prayers were inscribed, and which floated in the wind like the pennant of a war ship. As soon as you entered this little village of Spango, you felt you were in a different, in a peculiar country which respect for patriarchal customs had far removed from all useless progress, and which had preserved the simplicity of its race, its customs, and its religion.

Next day, when starting, we were saluted by a few poor musicians in rags who tried on the fife and the tambourine to give us an idea of Tibetan harmony. The group was certainly picturesque, but the music, with its shrill, plaintive burden, had but little charm for our ears.

The road followed at some distance the left bank of the Nubra. It was bordered on each side by a hedge of prickly shrubs to prevent the caravan horses from straying into the crops. In two hours we reached Panamik,[1] a fairly large village of which the name, singularly appropriate, means "eye of green."

[1] Altitude = 3,340 metres.

GATE OF THE VILLAGE OF PANAMIK

THE FIRST TIBETAN HOUSE MET ON THE WAY TO SPANGO

Hardly had we settled down, when we saw appearing a noble old man with a dignified air, wearing a field-glass slung over his shoulder, knives in his belt, and European shoes. He was a messenger from the English Commissioner at Leh. He was bringing a charming letter from his master, in which the latter bade me welcome, and apologized for being absent when I should arrive at his residence. The dignified old man, who occupied a high rank in the Tibetan hierarchy, was entrusted with guiding us, and looking after us as far as the capital of Little Tibet.

While Iskandar was preparing for the evening meal, we went with Zabieha towards a spring of warm water which flowed in the mountain-side. A kind of swimming-bath hollowed out of the rock, and protected by a screen, enabled us to have a very agreeable and very necessary tub, and we blessed the intelligent man who arranged these thermal baths in such a practical way.

*September 10th.* It had been decided that we should stay at Panamik that day in order to allow our men and horses to refresh themselves.

I allowed Iskandar and Zabieha to return alone to the spring, and I visited the village with my camera in my hand, for there were in this part numerous funeral monuments, in the shape of a tiara, called *chorten*, which are ornamented with bas-reliefs, of which it might be interesting to have a picture.

At the summit of the volcanic cone on which the

village is built among the wild-roses and the rocks, I discovered a sort of strange divinity. A cube of masonry formed a pedestal; on the central side was a roughly sculptured face with its wide ears and broadly-smiling countenance which bore a striking resemblance to the satyr-like image of a Silenus; the four corners and the face were covered with a vertical band of red paint; on the pedestal was a large faggot of tamarisk branches bound with linen strips on which prayers were written, and fixed above the faggot were several sticks ornamented with small floating banners.

On my way back I found a large rock which bore engraved in enormous letters the Tibetan prayer: "Om mani padmeh hoom."

Next day we left the cool shades of Panamik, and we descended to the left bank of the Nubra, under the guidance of the old man with the field-glass, who was lavish in his attentions. At the foot of the high cliff which we skirted, volcanic cones succeeded one another, some absolutely desert-like, others covered with vegetation and crops; the latter were always overlooked by the stone idol of which I spoke previously, and which no doubt represented the image of a god who protected the fields and crops.

The valley of the Shayok was coming near. We saw built right against the mountain, the pretty village of Taghar, of which the flat-roofed houses and numerous mausoleums made a display of whiteness among the

TIBETAN PEASANTS OF THE VALLEY OF THE NUBRA

tall silver-leaved poplars. The guide conducted us to our house, a vast house of two stories. In front of the door were five women in a line ; they all saluted us together in a very graceful fashion by raising their hands to the level of their foreheads. The one nearest the threshold was holding a perfuming-pan filled with incense ; she preceded me, and introduced me into my rooms by an imposing staircase. Two rooms, separated by an open-work balustrade, were set apart for their notable guests. In the way of furniture there was a kind of immense arm-chair of a kind unknown in Europe, and in front of the arm-chair an altar daubed with paint on which the offerings were arranged symmetrically, a silver pyx filled with milk, a plate of apples, another of big radishes, the whole flanked by two pretty vases filled with corn-flowers and scented wall-flowers.

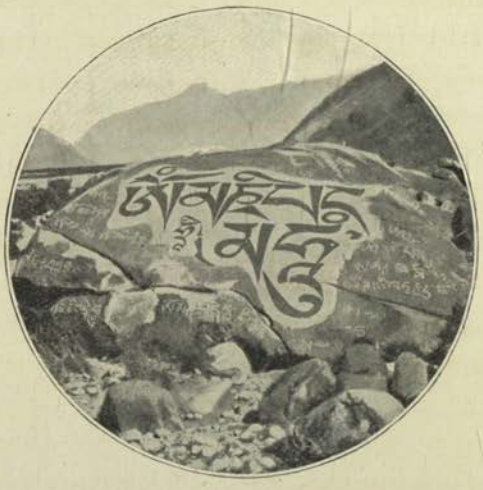
After a final salutation the Tibetan women disappeared ; they were replaced by our old guide, who served us tea with cinnamon, which was simply delicious. This reception astonished and delighted us ; as for Iskandar, he could not understand that women with uncovered faces, should welcome the stranger in that way, and his principles as a thorough-going Mussulman were deeply shocked by such impropriety.

After a few moments of pleasant *far niente* we took a walk in the village ; a broad avenue, lined with tall poplars alternating with *chortens*, led to an old temple shaded by plane trees. What a number of

prayer-mills! They were to be found on all sides—enormous cylinders turned by a water-fall, windmills perched on the roof like dovecotes, simple bobbins lodged in the wall which the faithful push with their hands. We admired the religious ingenuity of this simple-minded people, while an old lama, crouching under the porch of the temple, looked at us while sipping his cup of buttered tea. His head completely shaven, the trunk enveloped picturesquely in a purple material, he seemed like an old Roman senator draped in the folds of his toga.

Later on, from the terraced roof which covered our dwelling in the rosy light of the setting sun, I was present at the return of the flocks. First, trotting nimbly, came the surging throng of sheep and goats; next passed by more slowly the big cattle brought back by a whole swarm of half-naked children. Two bulls, the last of the band, engaged in a furious fight in a pond which seemed violet in the twilight; their keeper, waiting leisurely until they had settled their differences, sang a very soft chant with its uncouth, slow rhythm. I was still there, overcome by the charm of that natural freshness, when the stars came out in the sky.

We were awakened at dawn by the monotonous chant of the litanies which the head of the house was reciting before the altar of the domestic hearth. A poor devil with a white beard came in prostrating himself, and offered me on a tin platter a small pumpkin



A PRAYER ENGRAVED ON GRANITE

GENERAL VIEW OF TAGHAR

between two bunches of corn-flower. Then our gracious hostess brought me smiling with good wishes for the journey some Persian loaves sprinkled with sugar-candy. But we had to leave all these good people, the gay village and its white *chortens*, the old pagoda and its prayer-mills. It was one of the most delightful impressions I received during my long journey.

We now soon reached the confluence of the Nubra and the Shayok, which we found again after the immense bend that it makes to the south-east. Up till the previous year the caravans were obliged to cross the muddy waters of that river in a ferry, but now we passed from one bank to the other over a suspension bridge which seemed very solidly built. Some kilometres further we found nestled in a recess of the valley, the hamlet of Khartsha, where the old guide had had a lodging prepared for us. As soon as we arrived, he hastened to serve us that famous cinnamon flavoured tea, of which he had the secret, and offered it to me in his wooden bowl which had a border of chased silver, and a large turquoise set in the bottom. Like all his countrymen he never lost sight of that curious cup, firmly persuaded that if an enemy one day poured poison into it, the turquoise would change colour, and thus warn him of the danger.

We began that morning in a thick fog, following first the left bank of the Shayok along a difficult road, hollowed out of the rocky wall which overhangs the river. The meeting with caravans coming in the

opposite direction was here sometimes a ticklish matter, and we had, on that score, several incidents in which our men acquitted themselves cleverly. But a few kilometres further on, turning abruptly to the south, we disappeared into a narrow deep gorge which brought us, after a very difficult ascent, to the small village of Khardong, a real eagle's nest built in the rocks. The natives seemed much less refined than in the plain, and everything in their attitude, and in their physiognomy, led me to believe that they carried on the work of smugglers and caravan robbers.

It was understood that we should leave at Khardong[1] the pack-saddle horses which were to remain a fortnight there to recruit, before starting again with fresh burdens on the road to Yarkand; they were to be replaced as far as Leh by hired yaks. Alone the caravanbash, Khul-Mahmad, would accompany us the following day, and bring back the three saddle horses.

*September 14th.* I bade good-bye to the two caravaneers who stayed behind. Yussuf, the legend-teller, wept like a child, and I could not help being moved at the thought of leaving that brave fellow who gave so many proofs of his devotedness. As for him, day after day, during the strenuous years of his life, he would continue with the same courageous willingness that severe and constant struggle against the redoubtable forces of nature.

[1] Altitude = 3,920 metres.

THE MAIN SQUARE IN LEH

The departure was dismal. We started while the snow was falling in big flakes driven by an icy wind. We passed by a refuge where some caravaneers were crouching ; they had piled up their baggage in front of the door, while the horses, huddled together a short distance away, and turning their backs on the squall, looked like a black spot in the snow. But the fury of the storm redoubled ; it was impossible to see more than twenty yards away. A second refuge came in view ; like the other it was invaded by poor devils shivering with cold. About one o'clock we reached the banks of a small lake completely frozen ; two yaks, led by an old Tibetan whose beard was white with hoar-frost, had been waiting for us all morning, and Zabieha and myself took advantage of the god-send, whilst Iskandar, furious at not finding a third yak for his personal use, showed his ill-humour for the first time, perhaps. He had, in fact, such a horror of walking that, in spite of the real danger, he preferred to stay on his horse and brave in that way the precipitous slope we were climbing in a blinding snow.

For more than an hour we climbed in that fashion, and we arrived at the narrow pass of the Khardong[1] panting, exhausted, more dead than alive. As at the Kilyang-Davan, a glacier with a rapid gradient and covered with snow, almost stopped us short near the summit ; and if we got through, ourselves, our

[1] Altitude = 5,390 metres.

horses and our yaks, it was once more owing to the energy, the skill, and the endurance of the men who accompanied us.

As soon as we had crossed the pass, the snow ceased, and we rapidly descended a narrow valley at the end of which stood the hamlet of Ganglehs. It was now five o'clock, and we had taken nothing since the morning; consequently, it was with much pleasure that we sat down round a bright fire of boughs, where the *chudjaz* began to sing.

We were near the end of our stage; it was the 15th of September, and we were to sleep at Leh.

For the first few kilometres, we traversed a wild country as desolate as the one we had crossed the previous day. We thought we had lost our way, had taken a wrong track, when suddenly the strange palace of the ancient kings of Ladak appeared at a turning of the road. Built on a long rocky ridge, its innumerable small windows overlooked a succession of grassy brows covered with tiers of hundreds upon hundreds of tombs, some of dazzling whiteness, others darker, with the green rust of centuries upon them. In front of us, at the foot of the Himalayas, the Indus unfolded its silvery streak; on all sides were fields of wheat, orchards, and smiling meadows. What a contrast with the Khardong pass where, the previous day, we had spent such cruel moments in the snow!

Our old guide led us through the streets of the village[1]

[1] Altitude of Leh = 3,525 metres.

to a summer-house, shaded by immense poplars, where it appeared European travellers stayed. The rooms were very clean, very comfortable, and we could for some days take the rest we all required, protected from sun, snow, and wind, which in various ways had followed our caravan from Yarkand.

The Tibetan who did duty as a postman, brought me a voluminous mail ; it was now nearly three months that I had been without news. I was preparing to open my correspondence, not without a certain natural emotion, when a visit was announced. A Hindoo, dressed in European clothes, came forward with outstretched hand, and inquired very kindly about our health. In the course of conversation he explained that he was chief of the district, and replaced the English vice-resident, Captain Patterson, who at that time was at Srinagar. When he had examined our passports he left us, but he was immediately replaced by a deputation of Hindoo business-men, who under the conduct of the brother of the Aksakal of Yarkand, also came to pay its respects, and bid us welcome. I was anxious to read my letters, and wished them all to the devil. At last, when I had given the last hand-shake, I was able to retire to my room and give my attention to the familiar tattle of those who were good enough to take an interest in my journey, and whose thoughts had crossed so many deserts to find me.

The next day Sant-Ram, the chief of the district

came to fetch us to go and visit the great lamasery of Spitok, situated only five or six kilometres from Leh, on the banks of the Indus. Small Tibetan ponies carried us nimbly towards this celebrated monastery. From a distance it resembled an immense fortress of the Middle Ages, with its terraces, its embattled keeps, and its narrow windows, cut in the high granite walls. The roughly built flat-roofed nests are huddled together, facing the south, overlooking the sandy plain, and are so united to the natural features that they seem as if they had been created by nature herself.

We had now arrived at the very foot of the monastery. The sacred trumpets gave forth their sonorous wail, mingled with the muffled roll of the tambourines ; the heavy door turned on its hinges, and we alighted before a group of lamas assembled in a respectful attitude. Ascending a few stone steps we shook hands with the head of the Community. Perseverance in the pious meditation that is connected with seclusion and prayer had at length given the face of that grand lama a close resemblance to that of the classic Buddha : draped in his toga of brown wool, he really looked like a god in bronze.

We were led into an oratory full of the perfume of incense ; seats had been placed in front of a small table on which were flowers, pippin apples, and sugar-candy. In a corner of the chapel I noticed a whatnot, the shelves of which were ornamented with statuettes

THE LEH PLAIN SEEN FROM THE SPITOK LAMASERY

of Buddha, carefully placed beside each other. The lower shelf alone was reserved for the images of deceased " Father Superiors." Dressed in cloth togas they looked like a collection of puppets, but the faces were finely done and probably good likenesses. At the bottom of the whatnot, on a little table were lighted lamps, incense, bowls of rice and tea, cakes of wheat. The whole of one side of the room was occupied with manuscripts, piled one on another, from which there hung rich tassels ; on the wall delicate paintings on silk represented the episodes of the life of the first Buddha.

While we were munching a quarter of an apple, as etiquette required, the head of the Community informed us that he had done all his studies at Lhassa, and possessed a diploma signed by the Daï-Lama himself. I should have liked very much to cast my eyes on that Tibetan " ass's skin," but I did not dare to express my wish aloud, and we went out, still under the guidance of the superior, to visit different chapels, dark and mysterious, where old lamas at prayer had prostrated themselves before strange images.

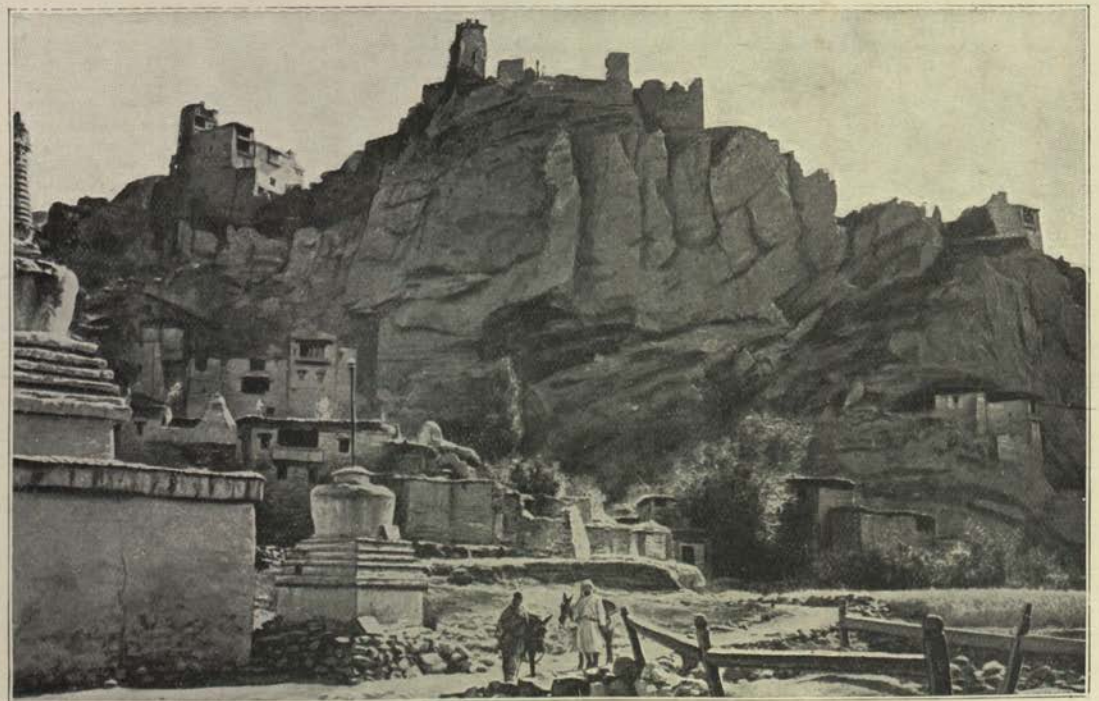
Leaving that curious lamasery we descended the path hollowed out of the rock, while long trumpets, as before, hailed us in prolonged calls from the top of the fortress.

On the way back to Leh, I asked Sant-Ram to tell me what he knew of the lamas and their organisation.

They are divided, he answered, into two categories, the first and most respected is the one whose members perform the ceremonies of the creed; the head is called *Kushook*. He is supposed to be an incarnation of some holy lama of bygone ages, who, at the moment of his first death, declared to his disciples, that he was about to enter into Nirvana, but that, still desirous of benefiting his fellows, he would continue to be born again. At the same time, he told them the hour and place of his next re-incarnation.

Since those far-off times the tradition has been religiously respected. On the day, and at the hour fixed, a deputation goes to the spot indicated by the defunct *Kushook*, and the child that has just been born is declared to be the re-incarnate lama. Shortly after this second birth, he is placed in the monastery to which he originally belonged, and becomes its spiritual head. There is, in a convent close to this one, a *Kushook* who is supposed to have reached his seventeenth incarnation. From the first class or category is also chosen the *Lobon*, the coadjutor of the spiritual head of the lamasery. His duty is to supervise the religious exercises, and to instruct the young lamas. With regard to the second category, it comprises the monks who do manual work, look after the business of the monastery, and oversee the farms belonging to the community. The head of this category is called *Shagzot*.

While listening with the greatest interest to the



THE TIBETAN VILLAGE OF BASGO IN THE UPPER VALLEY OF THE INDUS

explanations given by Sant-Ram, we had reached our domicile, and I shook hands with that amiable functionary while thanking him for the instructive pleasure he had just procured us.

*September 17th.* We went for a stroll in the bazaar[1] among a struggling motley crowd of Tibetans, Hindoo merchants, and caravaneers. The shops stood along the side of a fairly wide street, bordered by tall poplars and overlooked by the palace of the ancient kings with its original architecture. I went into the shop of the Aksakal of Yarkand's brother; it was filled with pieces of rich velvet "made in Germany" which were sent to him from Bombay, and would be sent on to Kashgar.

This velvet constitutes with silks and cotton goods the chief exports Chinawards; as to imports they consist almost entirely of *nasha*,[2] or *hashish*, of which the Hindoos consume a considerable quantity.

There was much animation in the town, still more in the surrounding country. In the fields, a swarm of men and women, armed with broad sickles, were cutting down the golden ears while singing; it was the noisy activity of a busy ant-hill, and the four

[1] In this little known market, on the northern frontier of India, it is strange that the German traders have succeeded in ousting their English and Hindoo competitors, who at first sight seem to have an admirable advantage.

[2] The sale of this stupefying agent, the effects of which are still more terrible than those of opium, is not prohibited in India. The Government has merely imposed on *hashish* a very high Custom's duty, equal to four times the net cost of the goods at Leh.

or five notes of the Tibetan song, which resembled the music of a bird, rose from the group of harvesters. Like the lark on awakening, they saluted the beauty of the sky, and seemed to thank Providence who gave them such an abundant harvest. In spite of the ardour of a burning sun all were gay, laughing, exchanging jests, and those I met on the road gave me a cordial *joo*[1], putting out their tongues as far as they could.

Sitting near a spring, in a pleasant corner, shady and green, I was contemplating these good people, so interesting in their childlike simplicity, and seeking in my mind the reason for my sympathy towards them. I was inclined to say that what charmed me first of all in the Tibetan was his gaiety. Beneath his savage, hirsute, and sometimes dirty appearance, this little man is joyful. He has the open countenance and merry eye of children. Contrary to the pensive Mussulman, sparing of words, and constantly prostrate in ablutions or prayer, the Tibetan seldom washes, walks along singing, and says his prayers by " sleight of hand " along the roads. This even temper, this frank gaiety, denote absence of cares, a quiet mind, a light heart. Such serenity is as precious as it is rare. Perhaps we must seek the cause of it in the organisation of family life, founded on polyandry. " Two cocks once lived in peace, a hen came on the scene, and lo ! war was kindled," said a fabulist. Here

[1] Good-day.

it is just the opposite : the hen can bring harmony into a household where there are several cocks.

As soon as a Tibetan has completed the marriage ceremony, his younger brothers become at the same time the husbands of the bride, and are bound to help him in his conjugal task. They are, moreover, absolutely forbidden to have wives in their turn, for no strange woman can be brought to the fraternal fireside. This legal partition of the duties and cares of marriage makes life much easier for the husbands, and it seems everything runs in the smoothest possible way in the families of Tibet.[1]

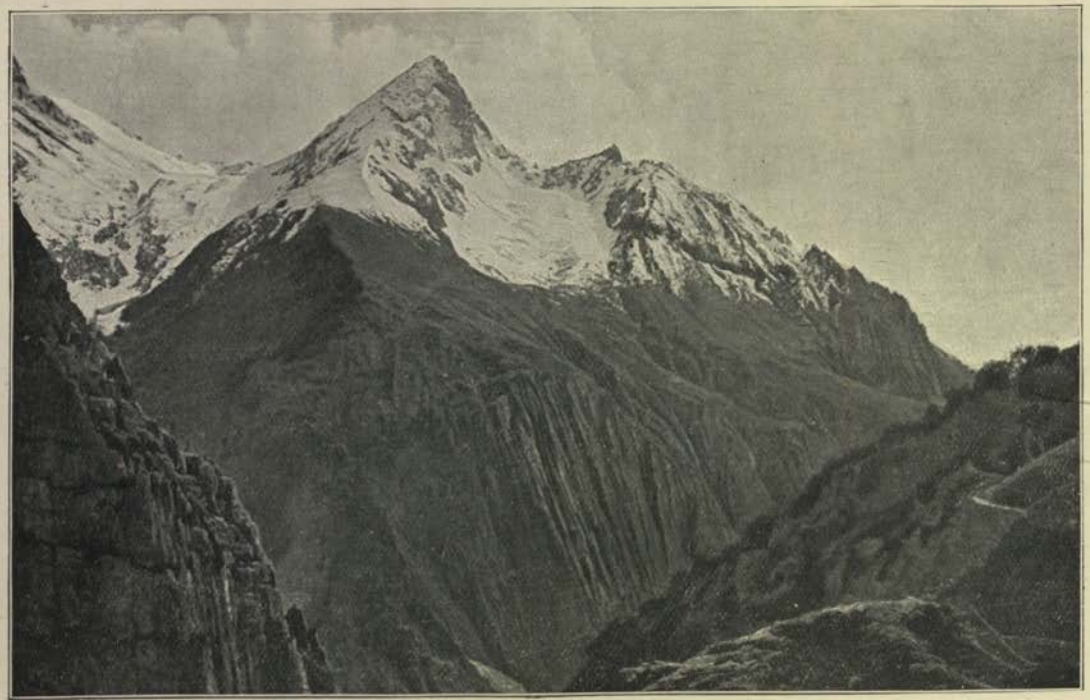
Day was drawing to its close ; the sun had already disappeared in a golden spray. Not far from the many-windowed palace, at the very summit of the mountain, the sharp crest of which is bathed in a lilac-tinted light, stood outlined a small temple, an oratory with blood-coloured walls, which in the penumbra of the twilight seemed, as it disappeared in the falling darkness, to rise sparkling towards the stars. On all sides, by innumerable little paths running from the fields towards the village, the harvesters were returning home in long lines. They were carrying on their backs large baskets filled with sheaves ; drops of sweat glistened on their foreheads, and yet they sang themselves breathless, dropping, in the plain

[1] Some authors think that polyandry was adopted in Tibet to prevent over-population in a country where the area of arable ground is limited, and where the annual grain harvest can only feed a limited number of inhabitants.

wrapped in the violet tints of evening, the notes of their quaint, gay music.

On the 20th of September I had received a very amiable telegram from the English resident at Kashmere, Colonel Sir Francis Younghusband, which bade me welcome, and invited Zabieha and myself to stay at his house during our coming halt at Srinagar. Nothing more remained, therefore, but to organise a fresh caravan to descend the banks of the Indus, and reach later the capital of Kashmere through the Himalayan passes. This work was greatly facilitated for us by our friend Sant-Ram, the chief of the district, and we were able to start on the 24th of September in the morning, bidding good-bye to that city of the ancient kingdom of Ladak, so picturesque and so quaint.

By a fairly good road, which passes at the foot of the monastery of Spitok, then along the right bank of the Indus, we arrived at the small village of Nimo, the objective of our first stage. The caravaneers conducted us to a kind of inn, the rooms of which were admirably clean. It was one of the bungalows which the English Government built some years ago about every twenty-five kilometres from Leh to Srinagar. These small houses, containing two or three rooms with white-washed walls, are remarkably well kept up ; they are fitted with a folding camp bedstead, table, arm-chairs, baths, etc. The tenant does not cook, but he is bound to sell the traveller those



THE HIMALAYA SEEN FROM THE ZODJI-LA PASS

provisions which are necessaries of life, and of which the price is affixed to the door ; in addition, he collects on behalf of the management a rupee per diem from each traveller. The arrangements connected with these inns seemed to me perfect in every way, and if I have here noted details which might seem puerile, it is because I have wished to show in what a practical way the English know how to organise everything.

On the 25th of September we followed the course of the Indus through precipitous and desert gorges. On our way we met with the picturesque hamlet of Basgo, the houses of which are built suspended to the sides of a rock. With its old keep and dismantled walls, it bore a striking resemblance to certain villages in our own Provence.

After midday we reached Saspul, where a bungalow, similar to the one at Nimo, offered us its rooms of scrupulous cleanliness. At this point, the altitude was less than at Leh, and consequently the harvest was over. On the beaten ground were lying the sheaves which were being threshed under the feet of oxen and horses, under the direction of Tibetan men and women. Some were winnowing their wheat in the wind with a regular and graceful gesture. Others in the sun were gathering by means of large shovels the grain in the centre of the threshing-floor ; all were singing their gay refrain, always the same, repeated in echo by the mountain close by. And

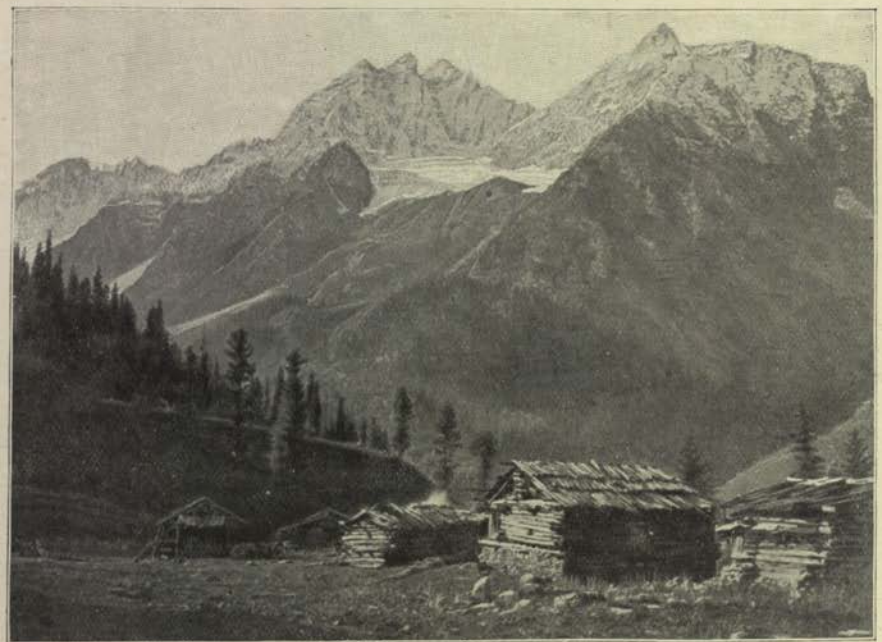
once more I admired the strange notes in that landscape dotted with small *chortens*, entirely white, which in the distance resembled a long procession of girls going to their first communion.

Next day we were at Khalsi. After crossing the Indus, we reached on the 3rd of October, by a road that was never very difficult but always picturesque, the pass of Zodji-La,[1] which gives access to the province of Kashmere

On leaving the defile we entered a magnificent forest of birch-trees with autumn-tinted leaves. You would have imagined yourself suddenly wafted into one of the most pleasant corners of Switzerland. In front of us rose tier on tier of pine-covered slopes, which the serrated glaciers of the Himalayas crowned as if with a sparkling diadem.

After the difficult stages through dismal solitudes, the fatiguing ascent of glaciers at an altitude which made breathing oppressive; after the slow marches through stony gorges, in the gusts of a continuous storm, during those long days where not a word was spoken till we halted, where under the tents, erected hurriedly, one vainly sought a refreshing sleep, the charms of the landscape so full of life now gladdened us, and it was with a light step, laughing and chatting, that we descended by pleasant stages that delightful valley of the Sindh. Here and there châlets with stone foundations rose at a turning of the road, then

[1] Altitude = 3,520 metres.



GROUP OF CHALETS IN THE PICTURESQUE VALLEY OF SINDH

came rice-fields, and flocks of buffaloes with their long crescent-shaped horns. Further down, the hawthorn and the wild briar flourished; the grasshoppers sang, the mountains died away, and on the 8th of October the great opal-tinted lake appeared in the full light of morning. We were in the capital of Kashmere, Srinagar, the Venice of India.

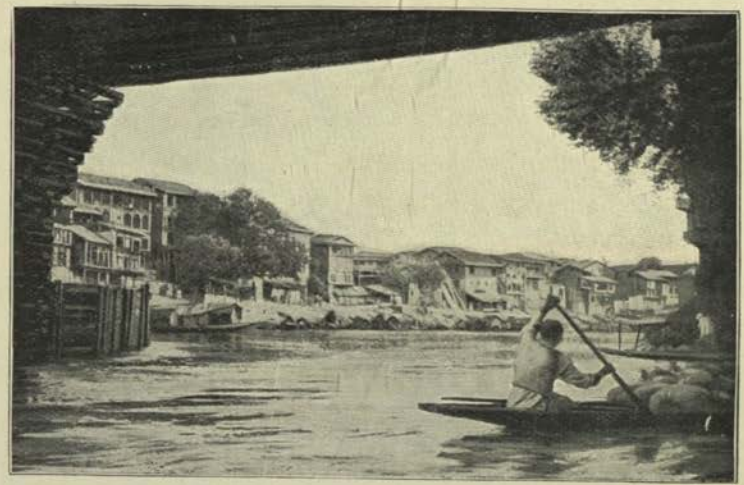
The same thought came into our minds, and both Zabieha and myself felt some emotion on reaching that town, the end of our first stage, in which difficulties were not wanting. But a second stage awaited us: when we had shaken off the dust gathered on the "Roof of the World" we were to brave the sands of Baluchistan. It must be confessed, it was the unexpected that attracted us; on the morrow we had forgotten the bright smiling valley which we had just crossed without fatigue, but we always kept a lively remembrance of the desert, of the uninviting passes, of the difficult moments, of the sleepless nights; for that is what one invariably seeks after. It is towards the unknown that we ever march with a shudder of delight and a joy in the mystery of which we are going to lift the veil.

As soon as we arrived we called on Colonel Younghusband, the Resident of the province. We were welcomed with extreme cordiality by that charming man who has often shown that to the merits of an officer and an explorer of the highest order, he could join the qualities of the most skilful diplomatist.

The palace of the Residency is a delightful Eden, hidden among foliage and flowers, where we found not only all the most modern refinements of comfort, but such an amiable hospitality that we soon forgot all the troubles of the journey.

The next day we went into the town on Sir Francis's boat. The river is lined with old houses, some painted in pink, almost all ornamented with open-work balconies. The buildings had the fragile appearance of those of Nuremberg, and in the pearly light which played through the openings in the architecture, with the picturesque wooden bridges across the river, the town also looked like a Venice in sunshine, a Venice in summer. On the blue waters, boats—I nearly said gondolas—were going to and fro everywhere, and from time to time rose the guttural shouts of the rowers paddling some listless gentleman to the shore.

The palace where the sovereign of this delightful country resides, is a large building of very inelegant appearance and strange architecture, built towards the end of last century by a British engineer. A few days after our arrival I was obliged to go there to pay to the Maharajah a visit which Colonel Younghusband considered obligatory. The prince welcomed me indeed with extreme kindness, and spoke to me at great length of his silk manufactures of which he is justly very proud, and which I had visited the day before. He had an amiable word for France, and dismissed me with good wishes for a pleasant journey. Physically,



A CORNER OF THE RIVER AT SRINAGAR

WHEAT-HARVESTING AT SASPUL

he was short, with a bilious complexion which accentuated the whiteness of the enormous turban which he wore on his august head; morally, a despotic sovereign, but very open-minded, who, under the discreet impulse of the British authorities, was endeavouring to develop the industrial and commercial riches of his kingdom.

Everything has an end, even a dream. After six days of such frank and cordial hospitality, we had to contemplate once more putting on the Alpine boots and returning to our trunks the fine linen and patent shoes.

On the 17th of October we arrived at Rawal-Pindi, and for the first time for many months we heard the whistle and puff of the locomotive. There I had, much to my regret, to separate from our faithful Iskandar, who asked my permission to join a group of pilgrims going to Mecca *via* Bombay. Feeling how useless my exhortations would be to induce him to give up his pious journey, I did not dare to refuse him a liberty which he had certainly well earned. Life in common during times of difficulty, the daily struggle against obstacles with which a wild nature opposes the will of the explorer, create a cordial intimacy between beings differing so much in age and thought, mind and education, that nothing ever seemed likely to bring them together. This stranger had become a friend, almost a brother. He was simply and modestly indispensable, and I can never forget

all that I owed, in this first part of my journey, to his perfect understanding of the service, to his initiative, to his almost continual good-humour.

As for Zabieha and myself, when we had packed our arms and camping accoutrements, we took the train, not for Bombay, but for Quetta, thus continuing our way to the unknown of the Balucha desert, towards new and mysterious solitudes.

# CHAPTER VII

## THE BALUCHISTAN DESERT

FROM Quetta to Kelat—An interview with His Highness Mahmud Khan—Loris and Baluchis—Nushki—On the camel's back—The posts on the trade route—Ramzan, the opium-smoker—An evening of mourning at Merui—The Desert of Thirst—A stage by moonlight—Robat and the Persian frontier—The Custom-house of Koh-i-Malek-Siah.

AFTER a week's stay in Quetta,[1] where I had been able, thanks to the help of the British authorities, to organise without too much difficulty the caravan which was to take me to Seïstan, I started on the 3rd of November, and by the Nushki railway, I reached the small town of Mastung, where Major Benn, the political agent of Baluchistan, was waiting for me. It was in company with this very amiable officer that I made a diversion of 130 kilometres to the south in order to visit Kelat.

We therefore started for the capital over bare gray plateaux, surrounded at a distance by high granite walls. The landscape was disheartening in its monotony, but we advanced at a nimble pace in light vehicles, baptized by the English with the picturesque name of "tam-tam," and just after starting on the second stage Kelat came in view. In the middle of a denuded, desolate plain, rose the high walls of a citadel of the Middle Ages, built on a rocky peak,

[1] From Rawal-Pindi we had reached Quetta by railway, *via* Lahore and Rahi.

and it was an unexpected vision, a strange one even in that country of Mussulman nomads, the sight of such a strong castle with its keeps, loopholes, and its machicolations.

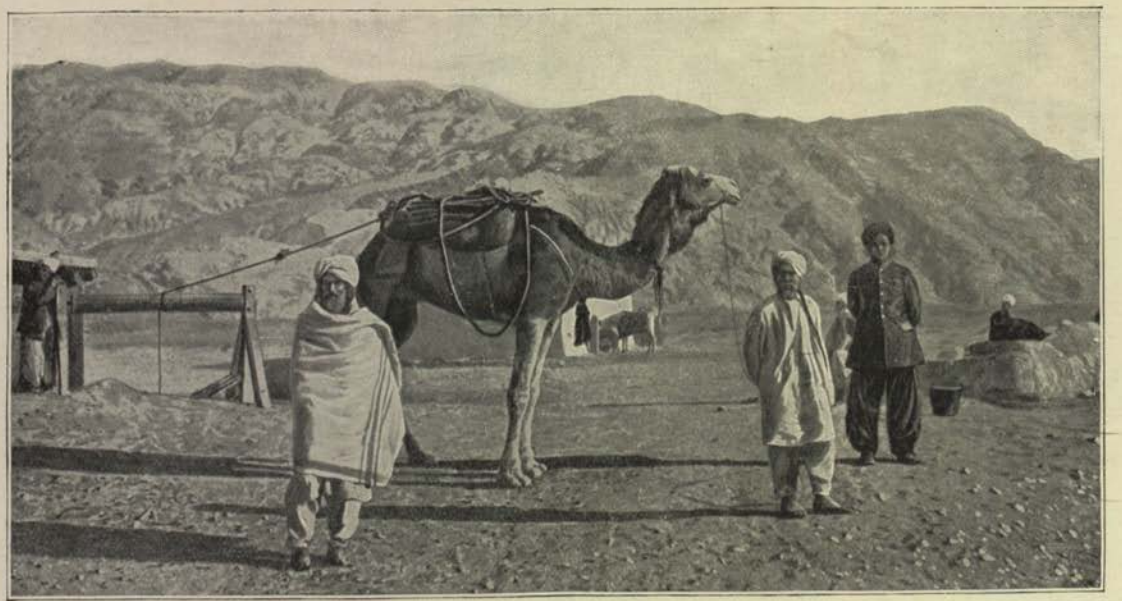
Welcomed at some distance from the town by the political adviser[1] of the prince, accompanied by a brilliant suite, we first came to an elegant bungalow[2]—the summer residence of Major Benn—where a lunch had been prepared for us. The British flag was already floating over the little white house, and the guns were thundering up there on the old towers which overlooked us, saluting with their repeated reports the colours of the Union Jack.

Our *tam-tams* being wanting in state dignity, it was in the Khan's own carriage, with a fine team harnessed to a magnificent landau,[3] that we went to the castle escorted by a troop of Baluchi horsemen, who showed off their horses in a somewhat irregular fantasia. We alighted in front of a large gate—the entrance to the first enclosure—on the arch of which innumerable quarters of mutton were drying, then by a narrow alley bordered with little shops, we reached the ladder-like staircase which leads to the fortress. An *aide de camp* of the Prince was waiting for us;

[1] The Khan has in his suite to help in affairs of State a "political adviser" of Afghan origin, a first-class man in the pay of the Viceroy of India. The British agent, though having a house near the capital, only makes brief stays, and resides most of the time at Mastung.

[2] Altitude = 1,890 metres.

[3] Present from the Indian Government.



CAMEL DRAWING WATER FROM A WELL NEAR KELAT

he preceded us, and we climbed after him over rocks imperfectly cut in the form of steps, through a maze of narrow passages which became more and more gloomy as they turned in the thickness of the walls. A postern opened before us, a guard presented arms, and we climbed still further by a kind of spiral tunnel which gave us the impression of entering in some enchanted palace from which we could never again depart.

Suddenly we were dazzled by the light of day: we had just come up as if through a trap-door, in the middle of a terrace, bathed in sunshine, where the prince, surrounded by his guard of honour, held out his hand to welcome us. With a gesture he then bade us cross the threshold of his rooms, and we sat down on arm-chairs placed in a semi-circle in a room with whitewashed walls simply ornamented with a few trumpery mirrors and glass-bead brackets.

Mahmud Khan has nothing of the majestic gravity of Orientals; his eyes sparkle maliciously, and without troubling about etiquette, he laughs loudly, shaking in his seat. After the customary compliments, he was good enough to say how much he congratulated himself on receiving a Frenchman for the first time in his capital, and he added:—"We all know that France is to Europe what Persia is to Asia, that is, the cradle of civilisation, literature, and art." Then, when the Khan had made this official and positive statement, he rose, and I made a grateful bow. This

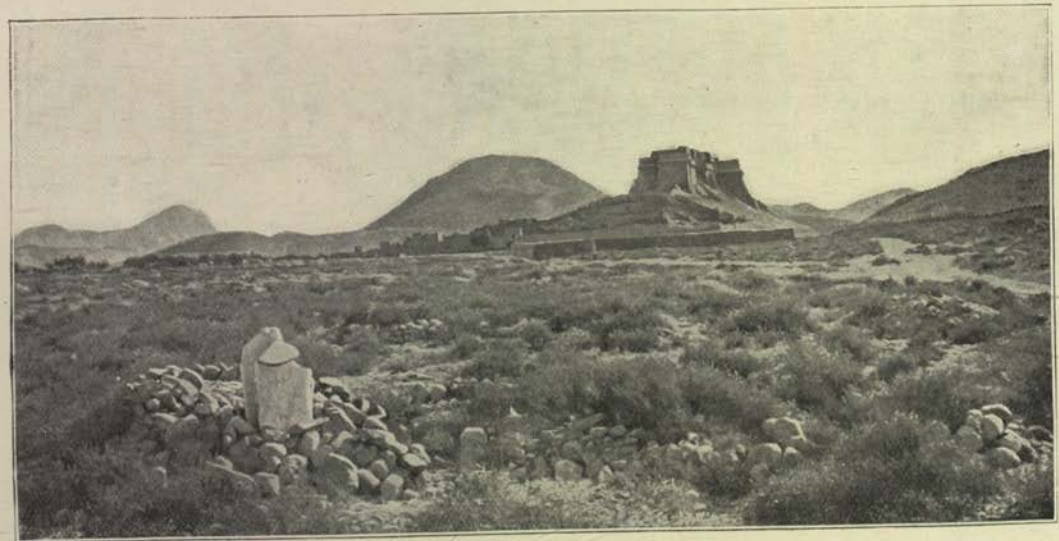
was the signal for departure. His Highness conducted us to the terrace and wished us, with the best possible grace, a pleasant journey through his empire.

Passing through, in the opposite direction, the labyrinth of passages, tumbling down the stairs cut in the rock, we soon left the palace, and at length restored to the full light of day, we descended the sloping alleys, among the houses of beaten earth, hanging like a swarm of bees to the sides of the seignorial rock. The inhabitants are, for the most part, Hindoo Bunniahs and Brahuïs; some, however, belong to the curious race of Loris who are, as we know, very closely related to our Romanies.

At a moment already far remote, a tribe of Loris left Baluchistan, crossed Persia and reached Europe through Turkey. Savants, who have studied the question, assert that there are many Baluchi words in the language of our Bohemians. In any case, I was able to notice that the type of the Loris of Kelat reminds one in a striking way of that of the Romanies. There, as in France, they take to horse-dealing as their business, and their wives are expert in the art of astrology and telling fortunes.

Of the history of the ancient inhabitants of Kelat, I learnt nothing that is not already known, except a very fine legend which was related to me in the shadow of the Baluchi fortress by an officer of the palace.

Baluchistan in far-off times, long before it became a



GENERAL VIEW OF KELAT

province of Solomon's empire, was a very poor country, and the natives offered a poor resistance to an irremediable poverty. Every five or six years, famine swooped down on the region, and made terrible ravages among the people who were, nevertheless, active and strong. The fact was, that instead of striving, of doing their best to force the land to produce in order to help them to live, the Baluchi accepted these calamities as a punishment, for imaginary crimes, as a certain mark, in any case, of the will of God, and they died smiling with their eyes turned to heaven.

They even prepared for that ever-expected death with a tranquillity which was not wanting in grandeur. Their houses, built somewhat like Persian dwellings nowadays, were made of uncemented stones, and the top of the cupola was supported by a central pillar, fashioned to a point at both ends. Imagine a nut-shell resting on a needle. A very feeble shelter! you will say. Yes, certainly, but voluntarily feeble; a momentary shelter created in view of sudden death. When the famine became such that it was no longer possible to live, the head of the family assembled all who were in the house around the fragile pillar, then he would call upon the superior divinities and putting his shoulder to it, like another Samson pulling down the house, he buried under the brutal heap of granite his smiling descendants, whom he thus sent to appease their hunger in eternity.

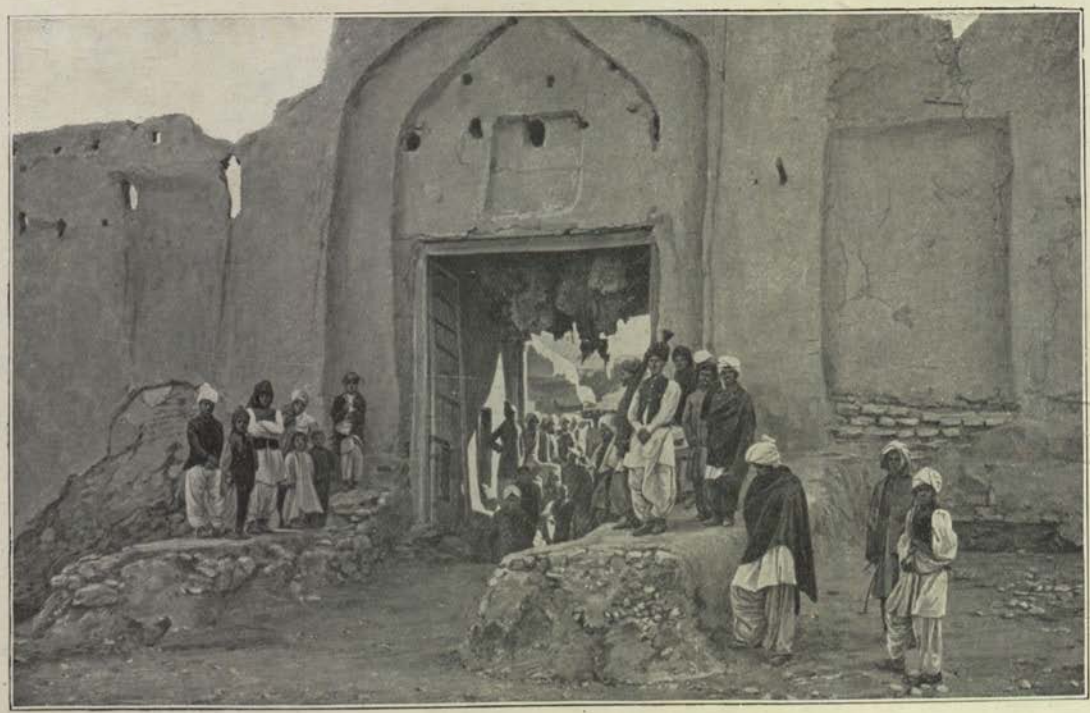
It would have been very interesting for us to

prolong that visit to Kelat, but, beyond the fact that time was pressing, we did not wish to abuse the kindness of our amiable guide, nor keep him away too long from his habitual residence. Consequently, we were back in Mastung on the 7th of November, and on the evening of that very day the train landed us in the heart of the desert, a few kilometres from the village of Nushki.

On the platform of the little station a solitary group at rest became animated on our arrival. Overlooking everything owing to his tall stature, a big Baluchi fellow ran towards us with his mouth full of salaams. He was the old camel-driver, Sher Jan, who knew the desert better than anyone, and who would be our guide into Persia. And there, further on, decked with many coloured rags and tatters, stood the two dromedaries bought for me at Quetta. They examined us inquisitively, with their almond-shaped eyes, and sniffing, it seemed, with some anxiety the Occidentals we were, they straightened with a raucous cry, and held out towards us their long, flexible, antediluvian necks.

Gradually the various articles of baggage were piled up in the ox-carts, and when at length the last box was loaded, we climbed on our beasts and started with a rapid trot towards the little town which stood out in the distance against a flaming sky.

What marvellous peace was there and what a sensation of happiness! Was it the joy of finding space



KELAT--GATE OF THE OUTER WALL

and the full liberty of the nomad ? Was it the satisfaction of seeing disappear in a far-off violet tint the gray smoke-plumes of the locomotives ? But the air that evening seemed purer and lighter in the vast silence of the solitudes, troubled only by the measured tread of the animals and the shouts of the camel drivers.

At the rosy dawn, after having passed through the only alley in the village, the dromedaries put us down in front of the bungalow of Nushki, where the Tahsildar[1] was waiting for us.

With his help, we had to prepare for our approaching departure for Seïstan. The necessary pack-camels had already been brought together. Like the horses of our previous caravans, we took them on hire, which in the desert is as good as a life assurance. As for the native staff, it was composed—besides our old Baluchi—of a young interpreter who bore with quite a royal indifference the sovereign name of Ameer Shah, and wore a khaki costume and the gray turban of the Afghans ; and of a tall, thin, withered Hindoo, Ramzan Khan, a silent man with distinguished manners, who was, it seemed, to do the cooking.

On the evening of the 10th November the caravan was at length ready to start, and the camel-drivers, having made a lengthy supplication for the blessings of Allah, started down towards the desert plain amidst a whirl of dust gilded by the last rays of the setting

[1] Native district chief in the pay of the Indian Government.

sun. Men and beasts went very slowly; they were to do their stage during the night. As for ourselves, we bade once more good-bye to the civilised world on the next morning at the first glimmer of dawn. Mounted on our riding-camels, and turning our back to the east, we disappeared into that desolate region of which a proverb has said: *When the Almighty created the World, He made Baluchistan out of the refuse.*

I have said, the reader will remember, that the entrance to the Pamir was the gate of Hell; now, when closing my eyes, I carry my thoughts backwards face to face with that immense Baluchistan desert, I think I can say that that God-forsaken land is like a purgatory, the sight of which alone invites you to repent. It seems as if Satan, in his fall, had swept it with a stroke of his wing, taking away everything which might be its joy and brightness. A solitude, absolute and forbidding; a region eternally void, where nothing green smiles on the traveller; a soil burnt up by a brutal and fierce sun. Nothing to rest the eye, nothing to arrest it. The wretched bungalows, placed at intervals along the road, would offer us during that interminable stage of 800 kilometres only a summary shelter, and sometimes even we should not find the drop of drinkable water which one would give a fortune to have in moments of fatigue and distress.

Yes, it is really a purgatory, where all is suffering

KELAT—THE RESIDENCE OF THE AMEER OF BALUCHISTAN

and misery, where the human being himself, born of that perfidious soil, seems to be made of matter that is scarcely malleable. The Baluchi, with his copper complexion, is cut out of the rock; he is formed of shadow and mystery. His dark eye is impenetrable, his dark hair shrouds him in night. He is silent, haughty, distrustful. Before opening his door to the stranger, he consults the heavens, looking for what nomads have called the "Guest's Star."[1] Let a traveller venture to the threshold of a tent, were he on the point of death, hospitality will only be granted him if the fortunate star accompanies him, and seems to say: "Give him good welcome." If the star has disappeared below the horizon, the traveller may continue on his way or die before the door; the dwelling will remain closed to him. Thus, even among men, the will which commands nature to be inhospitable and savage has been established as a terrible law.

*November 11th.* Having started at dawn, we proceeded all day under a burning sun, following the barely marked track of the pack-animals that had preceded us. Here and there some sickly tamarisk, some tiny piece of brushwood tries to arrest your attention in that arid plain through which our camels made their way, bit by bit, in slow and peaceful procession.

We still marched on towards the south-west, where

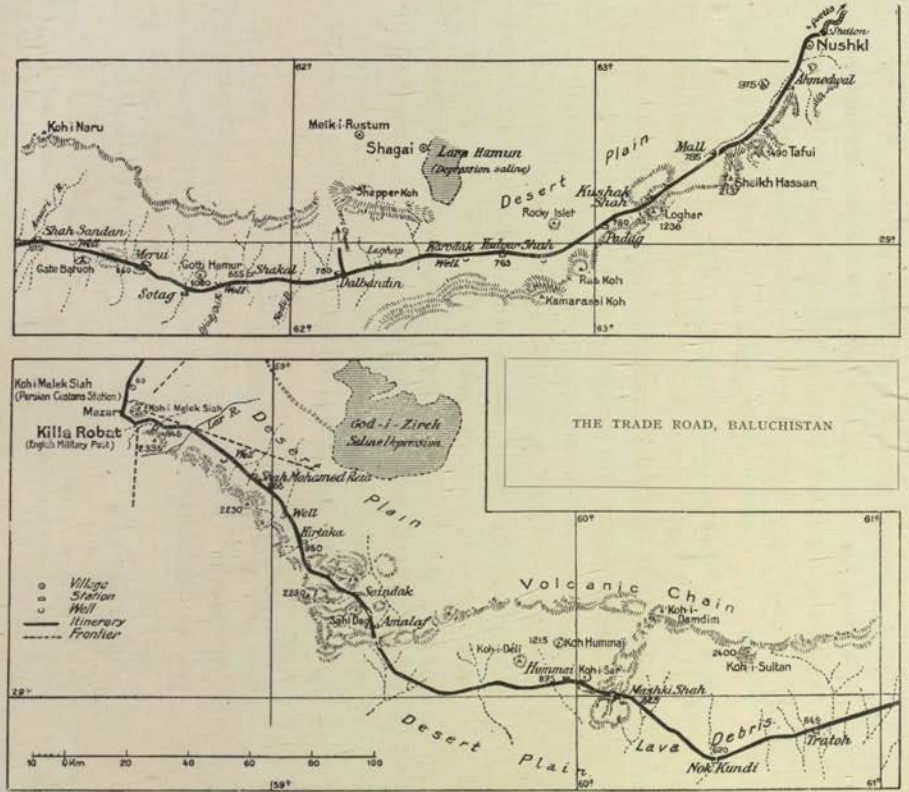
[1] Venus.

bristled the dark and curiously serrated mass of the Sheikh-Hassan mountain, and when evening came, at the moment when the shadows grow longer, our tall, docile beasts put us down at the very foot of a high wall of stone in front of the Mall bungalow. It is a cottage of beaten earth containing two large rooms; the one reserved for Europeans contains a camp bedstead, a table and chairs; the other, where the native functionaries stay, is more modestly furnished. The water supply requires, in addition, a shop kept by Hindoo Bunniahs, and a *thana*, a kind of Algerian *bordj*, where some Baluchi *levies* live under the command of a *thanadar*.[1] Such are the features of the posts which we were to meet in the desert at a distance from each other of about thirty-five kilometres.[2] In addition, we soon discovered that, even if the water from the wells was not actually wanting, it did not seem very inviting; it was of a beautiful chocolate colour. Fortunately, on the advice of the officers at Quetta, who considered it of urgent importance, we had procured a distilling apparatus —cumbersome, but how useful would afterwards be seen.

On the following morning we started early. The

[1] Native non-commissioned officer, at the head of the *thana*. The *levies* are an irregular cavalry corps in the pay of the Indian Government.

[2] The trade route of the Baluchi desert was laid out in 1896 by Captain Webb Ware, of the Indian army. It is impossible to praise too highly the merits of that officer who, in spite of numberless difficulties, brought that important work to a successful end.




THE TRADE ROAD, BALUCHISTAN

NOTE.—The Trade Road begins at Nushki and ends at Koh-i-Malek-Siah. Read from right to left in both maps.

camels went with a rapid, measured trot over a yellowish plain in which small stunted shrubs were growing. Towards midday we halted in the shadow of large tamarisks, to the great delight of our animals, which browsed with pleasure on their sweet-smelling and delicate foliage.

Further on, near a pool, the camelman made me alight, and coming close to my mount he made it a long speech, stroking its neck and pointing out the pool of briny water. The camel shook its ears. Sher Jan insisted, became persuasive, and seemed to threaten the animal with the anger of Allah. He was evidently inviting it to quench its thirst, and the story he told it must have been terribly touching, for Zabieha's mount, on hearing it, rushed into the muddy water without more ado, and wallowed in it up to the breast, to the great discomfort of the rider, who had no time to alight.

Two stages brought us, the one to Padag, the other to Zadgar Shah, similar bungalows to the Mall one; in the second one we spent the night of the 13th November. But we were not alone: a colony of termites were there as if at home, and made us plainly cognisant of the fact. Besides, they were old acquaintances I had met at Tonkin, and we got on very well.

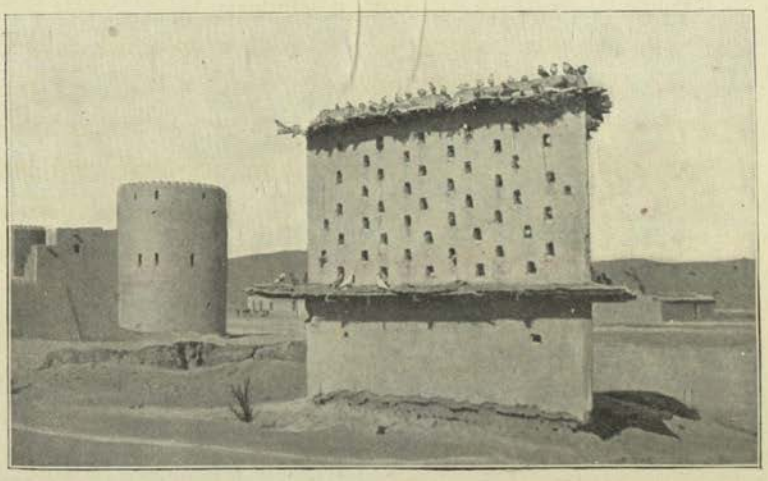
At dawn the route continued over a still hostile ground, where the shrubs became rarer and rarer, but where the mirages danced before our eyes

dazzled by the sun, and showed on the horizon like beautiful blue lakes which were continually folding and unfolding themselves.

At midday we halted near the ruined *thana* of Karodak. A large caravan had stopped round the wells near some tall tamarisks with elegant outline : the camels, arranged in a circle, were peacefully eating their meagre allowance of chopped straw, and the drivers, tired no doubt from a night stage, were sleeping in the shade of the scattered baggage. Nothing disturbed the harmony of this picture when we approached, and we rested like them, without troubling their sleep.

The mountain chain, which we had been keeping along since Mall, moved away to the south, while on our left a long volcanic ridge of a bluish tint came nearer. At the moment when the sun threw, so to speak, a golden gauze over everything, our camels set us down at last in front of the arches, all whitened with fresh lime, of the Dalbandin bungalow.

I found here a large parcel of letters from France. And there followed once more—after long solitary hours—that moment of emotion, when, holding in your fingers the thin squares of paper filled with tender thoughts, souvenirs, tittle-tattle from home, you suddenly feel yourself less alone, thanks to the evocative power of the black scrawl of those silent little leaves which say so much to a friend's heart.



A PIGEON-COT AT NUSHKI

OUR TWO RIDING CAMELS IN THE SHADE OF THE TAMARISK

We decided to spend a whole day at Dalbandin to enable all, beasts and men, to recover their strength. One of our men, the steward Ramzan, had lain down in a corner apart from the others; he remained there, motionless, silent, downcast. I was passing without seeing him; Sher Jan touched me on the elbow and pointed him out with his finger while shaking his head. The postmaster, who came up at that moment, put before me a telegram which the wretch was sending in my name to the Tahsildar of Nushki, asking him to send as soon as possible an enormous dose of opium. The reason of the sudden indisposition which had struck down Ramzan was thus clearly explained to me. He had exhausted his provision of the fatal drug, and like all smokers whose intoxication is complete, he could not live without his daily ration of poison. And there he was, paralysed, helpless, useless. Nevertheless the telegram would not go, and I feared very much that the poor devil would not go either; and that perspective caused me not a little anxiety.

The Sub-Tahsildar of Dalbandin offered me, to replace Ramzan, a young boy of twelve, named Dustok. I accepted. Our cook was decidedly too ill for us to think of taking him further; he would, therefore, remain under the care of the postmaster, who would send him back to Nushki on the first opportunity, unless he expired for want of opium, like a lamp that had no more oil.

Young Dustok's knowledge was not great, but he seemed intelligent and very willing : that was better, perhaps, than a vague culinary science against which we were powerless. But where was Iskandar, the perfect cook, the ingenious companion, the inventive disentangler ? His pilgrimage to Mecca would, no doubt, procure him a better place in Paradise ; as for us, we had to observe a Lenten fast, I fear.

*November 17th.* At daybreak, the few natives which formed the whole population of Dalbandin were assembled in front of the bungalow to wish us God-speed. Ramzan himself, delighted not to go further, was there, standing on his thin legs, wearing his little black cap adorned with a gold band. The elder brother of our young servant was also there to say good-bye to the boy, who was resplendent in his sky-blue turban—for he was now a *cordon bleu*—and in a gunner's jacket, with silver buttons, fitted to his slender figure. But the sun was climbing the heavens, and it was time to start. A final salaam and the camels were off at a rapid trot among the dark pebbles of the road.

We reached the Shakal station, on the edge of a dried-up river ; then the Sotag station, where the water of the wells is terribly salt. There was nothing particular to note on the way except the occurrence of those waterless rivers, all of which flow from north to south-west ; they rise in the high volcanic group which forms the frontier of Afghanistan,

and continue their course towards the large saline depression called Hamun-i-Mashkel.

From Sotag, where we made our midday halt, the track, become more and more undulating, brought us about four o'clock to the rocky pass which now precedes the Merui station. We soon saw the bungalow around which were pitched numerous little white tents; it was the encampment of a topographical engineer, forming part of a group which was carrying on operations in that region. The poor fellow had been in bed for two days, suffering, it seemed, from a violent attack of fever, but the Hindoo doctor, who was attending him, and who answered my inquiries, did not seem in the least anxious. Reassured we took the room next to the patient. In spite of what the doctor said, he must have been suffering acutely, to judge by his repeated moanings, which were very painful to hear.

Merui[1] is a somewhat important station; its *thana*, built at the entrance of a wild gorge, is overlooked by a strange tower with battlements, no doubt several centuries old. The whole is of the most picturesque description, but at the same time dry, arid, cold, lifeless, and of a dismal yellowish tint brightened by no greenery. It is immutably glacial, like some vision of a lunar landscape.

I returned to the bungalow where Zabieha had prepared our modest dinner with the help of Ameer

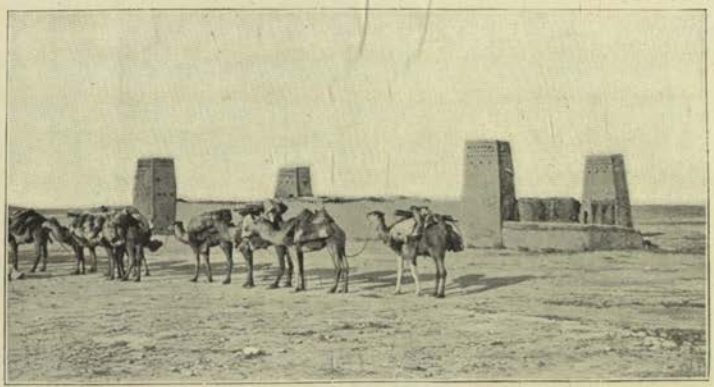
[1] Altitude = 850 metres.

Shah the interpreter and Dustok the boy, two perfectly useless persons, who could neither light a fire nor scour a pot. The unhappy engineer was groaning so much that I had my bed placed under the verandah : I thought, perhaps, that I should hear him less, and could try to sleep. In fact, the groans were decreasing in loudness, and I began to think that the crisis was passing, and that we should both have a good night, when a cry followed by prolonged sobs reached my ears. Was it a nightmare ? Alas ! I learned from Ameer Shah that the poor fellow had just drawn his last breath, and that the sobs came from his servants weeping for the death of their master.

There was something heart-rending in that death ; to die thus, alone, in a poor bungalow, amid a dismal desert, far from everything and everybody. I know no end more lugubriously sad, more despairing, with no words of consolation or the friend's farewell to soothe the last moments.

The night was wonderful and calm : the stars scintillated in countless numbers, and the thin crescent of the moon appeared on the strangely serrated crest of the mountain which hemmed us round. In the tents close by could be heard the laughter and singing of the people belonging to the unfortunate engineer's suite, who did not yet know that he had gone, but alone that time, on the great journey where no guides are required.

*November* 19*th*. As I knew that several English



OUR PACK-CAMELS IN FRONT OF THE "THANA" OF TRATOH

A LARGE CARAVAN HAD STOPPED AT THE KARODAK WELL

topographists were in the neighbourhood making plans, and that they had been informed, I thought that our presence was unnecessary there, and leaving that place of desolation and death, we set out in the early freshness of the morning.

The path first ascended for about three miles the narrow gorge, across which the Merui *thana* is built, then the cutting widened, the walls of rock got lower, and we came out on an immense plain, in the middle of which stood the rock of Gat Baruch, shaped like a gigantic table. There were still numerous dried-up rivers, with a few dwarf palm trees and sickly tamarisks. Towards midday Sher Jan had even the good fortune to discover a well, shaded by five or six date trees, with their long branches; that was a godsend we were bound to take advantage of, and we decided to halt in that corner which was almost fresh, and where there was a suspicion of verdure and life.

While the *giant* Dustok was busy preparing the fire, Ameer Shah set about a strange work: he made in the moist sand a little tunnel ten centimetres long, at one end of which I saw him put a pinch of tobacco, which he lighted; then, stretching himself on the ground, he placed his lips at the other end, and made a long inhalation of warm smoke. Our interpreter, who had no more cigarette paper, had just invented the desert-pipe.

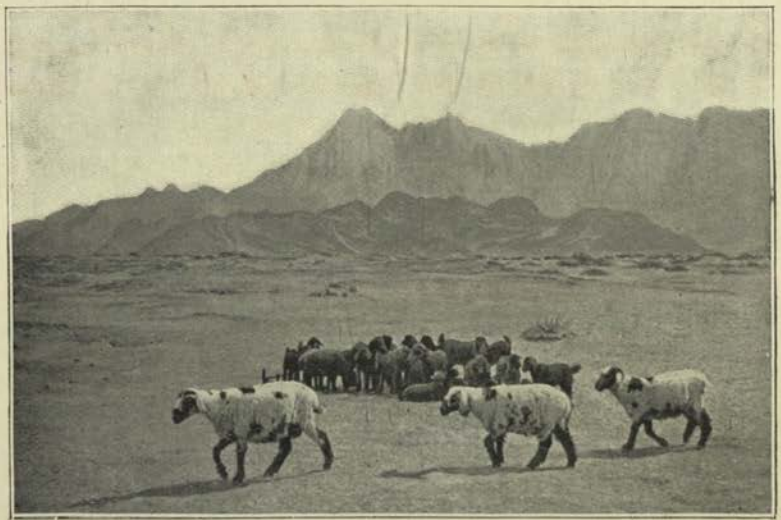
When we started again, it was still for the remainder

of the day the mournful and barren desert. Not before sunset did we alight in front of the bungalow of Shah Sandan, built on the banks of the Amuri river, one of the most important in the watershed. To the north we saw the enormous volcanic group of the Koh-i-Naru; to the north-west, far away under purple clouds, its twin brother the Koh-i-Sultan.

On the 21st of November, after a day's rest which the camel-drivers exacted for their animals, we resumed our way over a ground that was completely covered with black stones, and had no traces of vegetation; the track, very hard and stony, was becoming worse and worse for the camels, some of which were already dragging their feet. In front of us the great volcanic chain which extends along the Persian frontier began to appear above the horizon, and that sight gave us fresh strength, for that was the goal towards which we were going, and every step would now bring it nearer. For the first time since we left Nushki we met dunes of moving sand; scattered over the dark plain, they looked like enormous heaps of wheat.[1]

We were now in sight of Tratoh, the objective of the stage. There, the water of the well, which gave out a strong smell of sulphur, was totally undrinkable. The camels themselves refused it. The next day

[1] The dunes have the shape of a horse-shoe of which the convex side is turned to the north: they are not more than six to eight metres high.



A BALUCHI FLOCK

ZABIEHA SUPERINTENDS THE DISTILLING APPARATUS

and the following it was the same, but, as we had been warned, we had brought six leather bottles from Shah Sandan for those three days of misery. However, I saw Zabieha coming with a long face ; he informed me that our bottles were more than half empty. Who was the culprit ? The sun or the camel-drivers ? The accident had to be repaired as soon as possible, under pain of dying of thirst. Fortunately, we had the distilling apparatus which would once more stand us in good stead, and my gratitude went out to the Quetta officers who induced me to take with me such a necessary instrument.

Zabieha's riding-camel, which had hurt itself in one of the last stages, was becoming more and more lame. The sole of one of its hoofs was completely cut up by the sharp pebbles of the road. So that, in spite of the goat-skin boot which Sher Jan made for him, we could no longer think of making it trot. It was replaced by one of the pack-camels, and afterwards went at a walking pace behind the baggage caravan.

I sat down, as was my custom every evening, on one of the carpets in front of the bungalow and admired the sunset. It was the hour of calm and repose, during which everything is forgotten—the fatigues of the route, the ill-will of the camel-drivers, and preoccupations of different kinds—to become absorbed in the charms of inanimate nature. That day, the sight was particularly fine : the sun disappeared in a sky of dark yellow ; behind, the crater of the

Koh-i-Tuftan ; on the right the imposing mass of the Koh-i-Sultan seemed to be enveloped in long streaks of blood-coloured mist. Alone in the distance towards the west, a little rosy iridescent cloud, a mere speck, took the softest tints, in marked contrast with the sky, which from sulphur-yellow changed to orange, and then to green.

*November 22nd.* We marched across an immense dark-coloured plateau, strewn no longer with sharp pebbles, but with scoriæ, pumice-stone, and pieces of lava. Not a bush, not the smallest shrub, grew in that bare plain where the sun roasted us at will, and when the midday halt came we had, to shelter us from his burning rays, only a little stone wall that Sher Jan hurriedly put up. At four o'clock we were in front of the bungalow of Nok-Kundi ;[1] the distilling apparatus was quickly brought out, for the water there was worse than at Tratoh, and of our bottles only one remained full.

The next day's stage, with a provision of only two litres of water, brought us to the Mashki Shah station, where the caravaneers hoped at last to find drinkable water. But the hope was vain : the wells there gave a water that was atrociously salt and purgative. Our country alembic, seconded by the one at the *thanadar*, enabled us, in spite of everything, to have the necessary liquid for tea and cooking.

[1] Altitude = 620 metres. Nok-Kundi was the lowest point in our itinerary across Baluchistan.

AMEER SHAH OUR INTERPRETER AND DUSTOK OUR BOY, ON THEIR MOUNTS

ONE OF THE BUNGALOWS ON THE ROAD—SAINDAK

When we awoke on the 25th of November, the rain was beating against the window panes of the bungalow. We welcomed the prospect of a cooler air after that refreshing downpour. It was badly wanted. The route, more uneven, first crossed three small rocky defiles, then wound among cones which could easily be mistaken for enormous heaps of coal. A few kilometres before the Post Hummaï station, we passed between two tall rocks, and suddenly came into the immense plain where high dark-coloured peaks rose here and there like giant mole-hills. The sun was bright, the breeze fresh ; a soft pleasant light gave an exquisite tone to the landscape which seemed to have been washed by the morning rain, and of which the violet hues of the foreground, and the bluish tints in the distance were in strong contrast with a sky of infinite purity.

It was nearly two o'clock when our camels knelt at the door of the little bungalow of Hummaï where the baggage had already arrived. Sixty-five kilometres separated us from Amalaf, and in that long distance, so the old camel driver Sher Jan asserted, there did not exist a shelter, nor a tree, nor a drop of water ! If only the camels, exhausted by preceding stages, did not leave us on the way ! In any case, we were to take two bottles of distilled water; and to avoid the oppressive heat of the midday sun, we were to leave the post that very evening after sunset.

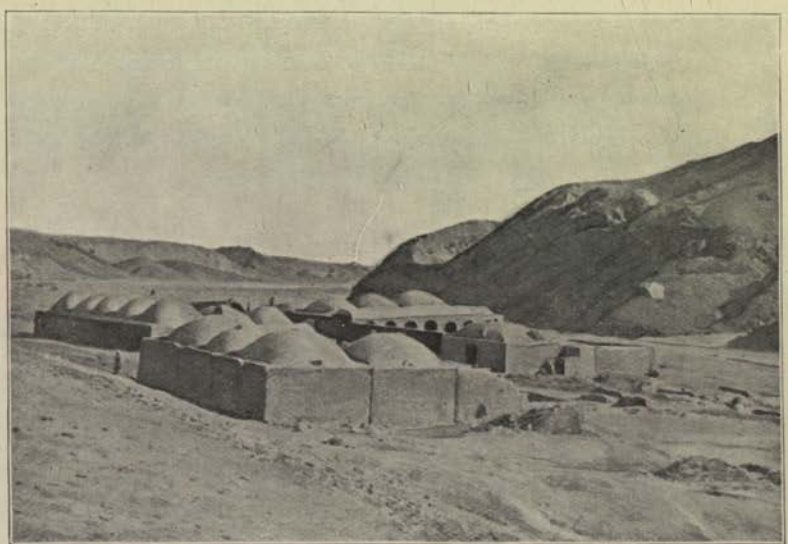
The little caravan started at nine o'clock in dismal

weather. Outside the wind raged, long black clouds flew over the sky in their mad course to the south, and the frightened camels uttered their unpleasing lugubrious cries. There, in that little house the window panes creaked and shook, making a shrill note which was accompanied by the whistling of the tempest; you would have imagined yourself in the watch-tower of a lighthouse on a stormy night.

Nevertheless, we all mounted our animals and faced the hurricane. A camel-driver from the station guided us among high dunes of sand, but the track was not always easy to follow in the darkness, and we lost our way several times. At one o'clock in the morning I ordered a halt; we were fearfully benumbed by the cold, lashing wind. The men, therefore, kindled a large fire of brushwood, and we all sat down pell-mell around the crackling flame, thankful for that moment of comfort. At two o'clock we started; the sky was almost clear, and we now advanced more quickly over an almost horizontal ground. We stopped once more towards morning, near a pile of dry wood, to which we at once set fire. Everyone was much fatigued; Zabieha went to sleep under the kindly eye of the camels, which ruminated with a noise like castenets. As for me, the cold prevented me from closing my eyes, and, curled up under the blankets, through which the cold wind blew, I waited the coming of the dawn that arrives late at that season.

We now climbed a long glacis, overlooked by a

WE SUDDENLY FOUND OURSELVES FACE TO FACE WITH THE AFGHAN PLAIN WITH THE GOD-I-ZIREH DEPRESSION IN THE DISTANCE



THE CUSTOMS STATION OF KOH-I-MALEK-SIAH ON THE PERSIAN FRONTIER

tooth-shaped mountain, which Sher Jan called Nowar-Bargar, then through a wide easy valley we reached at last about midday, the wretched *thana* of Amalaf. The stage had been done not without difficulty, and we could breathe freely. I hastily inspected the holes which served to lodge the station *levies*, but everything was repulsively dirty. It was impossible to take shelter even for a few minutes, and we breakfasted sitting on the ground in the shade of the enclosure wall. Besides, as the water of Amalaf was terribly sulphurous, it was decided that after resting we should start for Saindak station, situated ten kilometres further on. There, at least, we should find a bungalow, drinkable water, and provisions.

A start was therefore made, in spite of the fatigue which crushed us. We marched gently without whipping the animals, and through a low pass we penetrated into the narrow dale where the gray buildings of Saindak[1] stood in a dreadfully desert-like landscape. A few hundred yards before we arrived, we came to a very small stream, as large as a thread, but that sight was so new that we stopped in rapture—so did the camels.

The half of the bungalow was occupied by a native telegraphist, who kept his goats and hens in the other half. We had, therefore, to expel that menagerie before we could go into the only available room,

[1] Altitude = 930 metres.

where, in spite of everything, we were pleased to find a shelter after such a stage.

Overhanging the station, a black mountain with precipitous slopes, rose to the south-east ; it is called Sahi-Dag,[1] corrupted by the English into Saindak. Lead, antimony, and rock crystal are to be found there, the postmaster informed me.

After two days' rest, demanded by the caravaneers, and occupied in hunting wild goats in the neighbouring rocks, we resumed our way towards Seïstan. Once more it was the desert void of vegetation and life, but a chaotic desert where argillaceous hills, strangely gullied, surrounded us with their innumerable yellowish ridges ; then the scene changed, the mountains sank away, and we found ourselves suddenly facing the Afghan plain, which was lost in a distant haze of a strange rosy tint. The camels were now going towards the north-west, along the edge of that gigantic basin at the bottom of which there lay scarcely visible the depression of God-i-Zireh. In spite of the real difficulties of the road, we reached, at an early hour, the station of Kirtaka, built on a picturesque site on a spur overlooking the bare immensity of that new desert.

When evening came I sat down again in front of the little mud house and admired, in the calm of the closing day, a landscape on which the last rays of the sun fell with a delightful mauve tint. Crouching

[1] Black Mountain.

in a graceful attitude on the terrace of the *thana*, a young Baluchi shepherd, with long hair in ringlets, blew on his flageolet a short, tremulous and melancholy air. Close by an old man, with deeply wrinkled face, was preparing to say the evening prayer; with hands outspread, placed side by side, with a reverential gesture he implored the blessings of Allah. And the grave tones of the *Namaz Gar* were mingled with the shrill music of the flageolet, making a strange symphony, to which the caravan bells seemed to add the tolling of the angelus.

November was over: December had begun. On the 30th we had come to sleep at the bungalow of Shah-Mahomed-Reza, always keeping along the slopes north of the chain which overlook the Afghan desert. We now continued the same road, and soon reached the Anglo-Afghan frontier, which we were to follow for five or six kilometres.[1] A little further, the track which for three days had been following a north-north-westerly direction, turned sharply to the west, and, passing through a gorge bordered by cliffs, brought us by numerous zig-zags to the station of Robat.[2]

There we were welcomed in a charming fashion by the two British officers at the station, and I can say that we spent, in that out-of-the-way corner of Baluchistan, one of the pleasantest evenings in the journey. Robat is situated in a narrow valley, in

[1] Heaps of whitewashed stones clearly indicated the track.

[2] Also called Killa Robat. Altitude = 845 metres.

the midst of a strangely dismal landscape. There is not a scrap of vegetation to give pleasure to the eye ; on every side walls of granite scale the heavens, and seem ready to crush you under their high vertical sides. The water of the wells is scarcely drinkable, and the Hindoo soldiers refuse to distil it, so that fever, dysentery, and even scurvy, are common enough, it seems, in the small garrison.

We were six kilometres from the Persian frontier, and eighteen kilometres from the Persian Customs station of Koh-i-Malek-Siah.[1] There was only a short distance to travel and I should be once more in that empire of the Lion and the Sun, which I left on the 18th of May, at Gaüdan.

Delayed by the pack-camels which we had to change before entering Persia, and which we had difficulty in finding, it was only at eight o'clock in the evening that we left Robat after saying good-bye to our very amiable hosts, Captains Dunscombe and White.

The track crosses the frontier, then passes round the base of the Koh-i-Malek-Siah,[1] and afterwards

[1] Pyramidal shaped mountain at the summit of which the frontiers of Afghanistan, Baluchistan and Persia meet.

[2] Koh-i-Malek-Siah is, so to speak, the gate to Persia on the Indian side ; consequently for several years past the Persians have established a Customs station and the English appointed a native vice-consulate. The position is as desolate as at Robat ; it is a wide passage running north and south, overlooked on the east by a high rocky wall, on the west by pebbly hummocks, the spurs of the Palan-Koh hills. Although the water is drinkable, no vegetation grows in the valley, where the rocks alone seem to be able to grow and multiply.

enters the stony bed of a dried-up river, where my faithful camel stumbled every moment on the flat pebbles which rebounded with a noise like crockery. Suddenly, he stopped and sniffed as if seized by sudden fear. A child had suddenly appeared as if out of the earth, there, close to me, and in the moonlight I saw him holding out a wooden bowl with a supplicating gesture. We were in front of one of the most venerated mazars in Persia, and this urchin with the green turban was the keeper of the monument. While our men, who had dismounted hastily, were prostrating themselves in front of the heap of stones surmounted by poles bearing multi-coloured ornaments, I looked at that curious picture which, under the pale light of the moon, seemed a fairy picture painted by Gustave Doré. We started again; bright spots appeared in the valley, and our camels soon placed us before the tent of the British vice-consul of Koh-i-Malek-Siah.

At that hour, everything seemed asleep in the village and in the camp; meanwhile, at the entrance of the canvas cottage, two vigilant guards suddenly presented themselves to our astonished eyes. They came towards us with an air of comic gravity: they were a big shepherd's dog and a delightful kitten. The coat of both was as white as snow; they hesitated for a moment, and seemed to consult each other by a look. But the dog sniffed friends; he wagged his tufted tail, and the young cat, reassured, came with him to rub against our legs, as if to wish us welcome.

A Hindoo doctor came up to us half dressed, terrified on account of our visit which he did not expect that day. He woke up his people, hustled them, shouted, stormed, and managed in less than a quarter of an hour to give us a comfortable tea, so that, completely refreshed, we were able to go to sleep in those great peaceful solitudes.

The English vice-consul, Captain Aṣhraff-Khan, under whose tent we spent the night, came next day from Nasretabad. As an officer in the Indian army, he wore European costume with much elegance, without even adding, as many Hindoo functionaries do, the distinctive note of the turban. He was a most amiable, and at the same time, a most learned talker. I listened to him for hours without wearying as he talked to me of the Seïstan, of its people, of its customs, of its great ruined cities of which I had been dreaming so long.

We started soon afterwards, and taking a northerly direction—after that long stage to the west, which began near Leh—we penetrated into the territories of the ancient Drangian, violating by our inquisitiveness the mystery of civilisations that have disappeared.

# CHAPTER VIII

## FROM KOH-I-MALEK-SIAH TO MESHED

HAOZDAR and its ancient fortress—Nasretabad—A dead town on the Afghan frontier—At the Hilmend dam—Navigating a river—A sand tempest—Christmas at the British consulate—Departure for Meshed—A halt at Birjand—Wretched days in the snow—The loop was successfully looped.

WE left Koh-i-Malek-Siah on the 5th of December in the morning.

The caravan at first made its way between two ranges of black cliffs, as far as the wretched *thana* of Hurmak, where a few springs brought a little verdure. Then suddenly the valley widened, the hills sank away, and we entered a vast desert of gray stones. On the right, that is towards the east, the depression of God-i-Zireh was faintly visible; to the south rose the gloomy pyramid of Koh-i-Malek-Siah, while towards the west a long chain, the Palan-Koh, barred the horizon with its serrated top.

This first stage brought us early to the Reg wells, near which our little band quickly set up their tents. At dawn, the rosy sky coloured with a soft pale tint the tamarisks which surrounded us; then night came, an Oriental night, all scintillating with stars. Then our men, pleased when day was over, settled round a large fire of branches, and we had for a moment

the noise and gaiety of life in this remote corner of the dead immensity of the desert.

Next day we advanced through an argillaceous plain to the rapid stride of the camels, delighted, undoubtedly, no longer to feel under their bruised feet the pebbly ground of the Baluchi country. We now came to the Shellah, a wide canal with precipitous banks which during the times of inundation unites the lakes of Seïstan with the less elevated basin of God-i-Zireh. At the season we reached it, the communication had not been established; at numerous points, however, there were deep reaches filled with strong saline water. Ashraff-Khan had led us to think we should have some duck-hunting in those latitudes, but alas! as far as the eye could reach, no fluttering of wings disturbed the horizon.

On the other side of the canal, perched on a sand hill, some ruins of imposing aspect attracted my attention, and as it was the hour of the midday halt, we turned towards those high walls, the shade of which would be welcome. Four identical buildings, with half-demolished cupolas, surrounded a kind of narrow yard; they occupied the summit of the dune where stood, closely placed against one another, innumerable sarcophagi made of bricks dried in the sun. In former times, according to Sher Jan, the inundation covered the surrounding plain every year, and to defend their dead from the disrespectful invasion of the waters

A KAÏNAT PERSIAN SPINNING WOOL

THE SPRINGS OF HURMAK WHERE THE SOUTHERN ROAD PENETRATES INTO SEÏSTAN

of the Hilmend, the natives buried them on the few hills in the region.

Resuming our way northwards, we passed the Nowar wells, and about four o'clock we crossed the threshold of the English *thana* of Ghirdi Shah, the honours of which were done by a splendid *thanadar* with a long henna-red beard. It was not furnished with luxury, but everything was exquisitely clean and flattering to British administration.

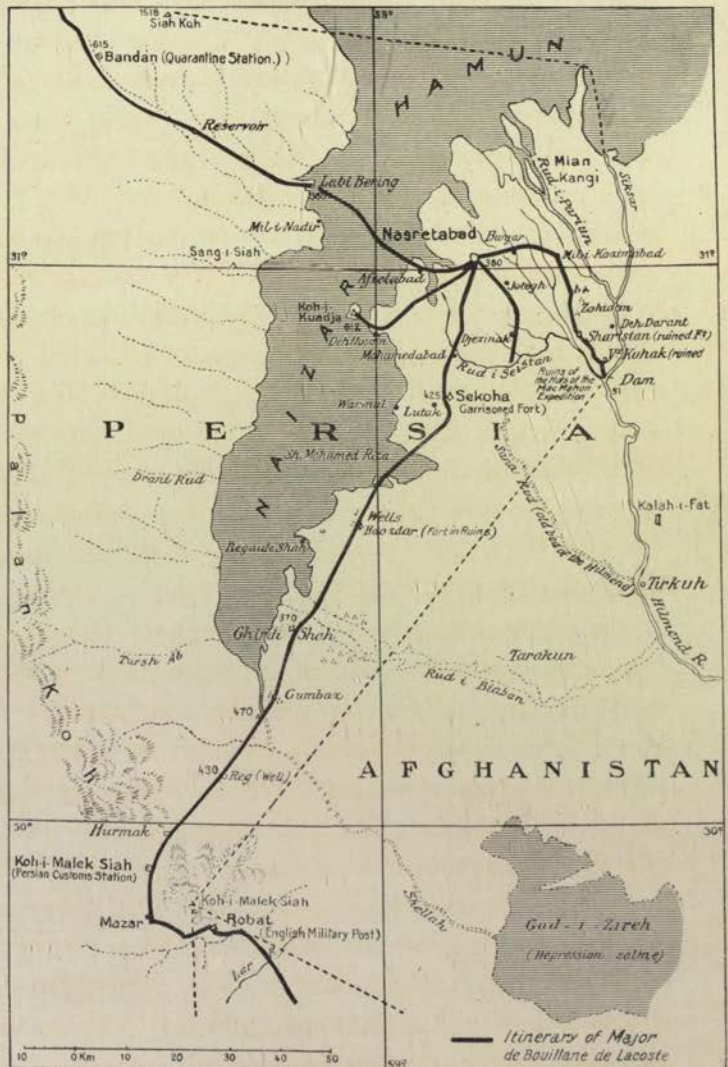
We left the station very early, by a marvellous moonlight. Gradually, the East became brighter; first came a rosy light, barely visible, which imperceptibly spread, bathing the whole horizon in a uniformly red tint; then, suddenly, in a rent in the blood-red haze, the orb of day appeared, casting on the plain the deformed and fantastic silhouette of our animals. In that argillaceous solitude we marched all the morning with the same regular, swinging gait. Sher Jan told me that the ground we were treading was formerly occupied by immense pasture-lands, but that a dispute with the Afghans having led to the drying up of the Tarakun canal, vegetation disappeared, and the inhabitants migrated towards the north, where they still are.

It was nearly nine o'clock when our camels knelt before the large gate of the Haozdar fort, the high walls of which flanked by towers only keep guard over the desert. In the shadow of these ruins, beneath the pointed arch of the entrance we settled down

for the daily halt. But it was in vain that I sought, in these marvellous remains of a vanished architecture, an inscription, a document which could identify the time of the building of the fortress. There remained nothing above the ground except dried clay bricks, eaten away by the dust of centuries.

In spite of the heat, we started about two o'clock. We came in front of two wretched huts near which moved and swarmed a bleating multitude of sheep and goats: it was the Shah-Mohamed-Reza well. Some shepherds drew a muddy water, which they poured into a kind of trough, hollowed out of the sand itself; and our camels, which had not been able to quench their thirst since our departure, turned towards that lucky watering-place their long flexible necks, and gargled contentedly.

The scene changed. Nowhere, as in these parts, has capricious nature amused herself more with the fancy of contrasts. Sky, air, the appearance of the ground and of things, all change at a turn in the path. Here, you have the surprise of a smiling landscape and a fruitful land. In less than an hour's march you have suddenly arrived among crops; on all sides irrigation channels overflowing, wheat fields, meadows in which big red oxen are grazing and tillers are moving about clothed in blue. The country is peopled, and everywhere black tents appear, in front of which women and children stand to see us pass, while big dogs with tawny coats bark furiously at the heels of our animals.




THE PERSIAN PROVINCE OF SEÏSTAN

Nothing can give an idea of the impression produced on seeing this fertile, living country after marching thirty days in the most desolate, the most gloomy solitude in the whole world, perhaps. The smell of the freshly-turned soil intoxicated me, delighted me; it gave me an inexpressible joy to inhale it deeply, and the end of that stage, which brought us to the village of Lutak, at the violet-tinted hour of twilight, seemed to me the most delightful in the journey.

*December 9th.* On that day, riding the horses which the British consul graciously sent us, we started at dawn, advancing at a rapid pace among vast cultivated fields. We passed the village of Sekoha, and its fortress with embattled keeps, containing a small Persian garrison. Further on, we found the secretary of the Russian consul who came to bid us welcome, followed by all the Cossacks in full uniform. Congratulations, a halt under a magnificent tent purposely put up, a quick lunch, and then we were off to Nasretabad!

About four o'clock we saw the first cupolas appear, and in an immense gray plain, which had become arid and desolate, the small capital came gradually in view. Our cavalcade passed along the walls of the official town, then in front of the Russian consulate flying the colours of the two allied nations, and through the gate of the British consulate; whilst drawn up in line, Cossacks and Sowars,[1] with drawn swords, did the honours.

[1] Lancers in the regular army of India.

Our host, Captain Dawkes, gave us a charming welcome. In the warm intimacy of his comfortable home we renewed contact with civilised life, and the evening was spent in chatting pleasantly around a tall chimney-place in which shone the bright flame of large branches of tamarisks.

We had thus, after numberless stages, reached the capital of that somewhat mysterious province, that ancient Drangian, the extraordinary fertility of which made it a prey to every conqueror : Alexander, Genghis-Khan, Tamerlane ; then, in more recent times, Nadir-Shah destroyed with unwearying persistence the riches of that unique oasis amidst the bare immensity of the deserts.

In the last few years the two rival influences which disputed the Iranian empire have carried on a very active policy from which the country has, perhaps, suffered. But now that the Seïstan is included in Great Britain's sphere of influence, and that all competition is removed, we may be certain that the English will be able to bring back to that region the prosperity it knew in the first centuries of Arab dominion.

The capital is composed of two distinct agglomerations : Nasretabad, a half-demolished fortress where the Persian governor resides, and Husseinabad, a group of poor hovels among which stand the two European consulates. The whole does not comprise more than four to five thousand inhabitants.

GATE OF THE RUINED FORTRESS OF HAOZDAR

Certainly, the political situation of Seïstan would have been worthy of profound study, but I had not come to indulge in an inquiry of that kind; what interested me before everything else, and what I had come to see, were the curious ruins of the region, the river Hilmend and its great dam, and finally, the holy mountain of Koh-i-Kuadja, and its belt of salt lakes. It was, therefore, agreed that under the ægis of our host, we should visit those different wonders, and that we should begin by a short excursion towards the Afghan frontier.

*December* 13*th.* Early in the morning, in the consulate garden, we got on horseback under a sky of wonderful limpidity. In the plain, as far as the eye could reach, the young shoots of corn made the ground a kind of emerald green, and from time to time a passing breeze swayed these immense green expanses and gave them a delicate wavy tint.

Our progress was slow, for the horses slipped on the moist clay, and at every moment we had to cross wide irrigation canals, which were sometimes deep, and in them the poor animals boggled and floundered freely. About five kilometres from Nasretabad we crossed the modern village of Bunjar, to the great consternation of the inhabitants, who were much astonished at that European cavalcade; then, continuing to march westwards, we arrived about midday in front of an immense tower which rises in the middle of the plain. It is known in the country under the name of

Mil-i-Kazimabad,[1] or pillar of "Kazimabad." Built of red brick, it bears two circular inscriptions, one half way up, the other at the top, written in cufic characters. To the inside wall is affixed a staircase between the steps of which countless colonies of bees were nestling.

The consulate's cook who had gone before us served us, in the shade of the monument, an excellent breakfast, which was a contrast to the summary meals which Ameer Shah prepared for us in the Baluchistan solitudes. At two o'clock we started; the consul and Zabieha went hunting on the Afghan frontier while, in company with the interpreter Fazer-Aman, I went to explore the ruins of the ancient city of Zahidan, which covered the plain to a length of more than ten kilometres, and extended as far as the Hilmend. There enclosures succeeded enclosures, and porches porches; but all was laid waste, almost completely eaten away, by the fierce winds of Seïstan.

The silence of those mysterious ruins, scattered by time into a strange chaos, leaves the spectator himself silent in presence of the remains of a departed splendour of which the intense, wonderful life cannot be evoked by any human thought, however far it may look back. Those immense visionary towns,

[1] This monument, the only one built of burnt bricks in the Eastern part of Seïstan, is probably of the twelfth century. It is about twenty metres high, and its base, of which we found only the foundations, was seven metres square.

SEÏSTAN—A BALUCHI WOMAN WEAVING A CARPET AT THE ENTRANCE OF HER HUT

formerly resplendent with the richest colours of the East, those opulent cities whose joy and activity an awakened imagination gladly resuscitates, are now cast to oblivion, cold, dead, non-existent. From that high wall which was crumbling away, and from the summit of which the loud call of the trumpets must have resounded, there dive into empty space dismal owls with dusky plumage whose lugubrious croak calls for night. No graven stone that speaks, no inscription that tells its story. On the ground laid waste, where even grass no longer grows, the foot merely strikes against pieces of porcelain of wonderful designs, of the most delicate tones, which are the luminous remains of the intimate life of those grandiose palaces. You tear yourself away with difficulty from the enigmatical spell of that inanimate land, and several times, as if in spite of yourself, you stop to look backwards and fill the eyes and memory with that magnificence now extinct, now scattered to the winds.

It was late, and the sun already nearing the horizon when we arrived at the camp. The tents were grouped that night at the very foot of an ancient redoubt, uprooted by centuries, but still formidable in its powerful mass, coloured by the last gleams of the setting sun. What sieges it must have undergone! What assaults it must have repulsed! I carried my imagination back to the time when the armies of the greatest captains encamped where we stood, where those giants

of another age dreamed of war or conquest beneath that same sky which alone has not changed.

Meanwhile, night had fully come; nothing more was left on the serrated top of the walls but a thin streak of light, a rosy mist that was scarcely visible. Then I questioned Fazer-Aman, my companion, on the end of that strange town; I asked him to tell me at what epoch it had disappeared for ever. "God alone knows," he answered, very calmly, with the fatalist tone of an Oriental, and his hand pointed to the small pale crescent moon, which rose in the sky above the fortress.

That night of the 14th of December was particularly disturbed by the howling of the jackals and the dogs which carried on terrible fights around the camp. At breakfast the children of the neighbouring hamlet stood around us: the type of the majority reminds one strongly of the fellahs on the banks of the Nile, but some of them belong to the negro race, and show all the characteristics of the Soudanese. How did these Africans, who are neither met in Baluchistan nor in the neighbouring regions, reach this point? That is a problem which I give without trying to solve it.

While Dawkes and Zabieha went hunting on the banks of the Hilmend, Fazer-Aman took me to an ancient city situated more to the south. The first part of the way led us into thickets of tamarisk intersected by large cultivated glades. Here and there

THE MODERN VILLAGE OF BANJAR NEAR NASRETABAD

were groups of Baluchi[1] huts, made of wattles covered with clay; around them the dogs kept good guard, and we should have been bitten if we had not been on horseback.

As we proceeded, the trees became taller and thicker, and it was almost an impenetrable forest which surrounded the hill where formerly stood the town of Charistan, the objective of our journey. Climbing on the immense clay-coloured mound which overlooked the plain as far as the eye could reach, we saw indeed two or three huts, but alas! no ruin met our disappointed gaze. The wild winds had done their work; and the wretched nomads that I questioned, in the vague hope of some tradition that had been preserved, were silent on the story of that ancient fortress. A few kilometres across a country, always the same, brought us to a large Baluchi village where it seemed the chief of an important tribe resided. Moreover, our coming had, no doubt, been signalled to him, for we saw him hurrying towards us, followed by his pipe-holder. Alas! we had to enter for a little into his dwelling, and sit down to take tea, on a many-coloured carpet, where there must have been a prosperous colony of little creatures whose name I do not know, but whose malevolent disposition I only know too well.

[1] The numerous Baluchi who live in Persian territory inhabit only these fragile huts, or large black tents, while the Iranians live in cubes of masonry with a cupola roof.

Old Charistan now receded behind us while we came nearer a line of black-looking hills dotted with ruined buildings, the remains of what was a few years ago the residence of the MacMahon expedition. Our encampment was placed quite near it, the guide told me. In fact, we soon heard the blow of the heavy mallets on the tent pegs, the barking of the dogs, the shouts of the men, and we entered the canvas village, on which the twilight that had already come spread its exquisitely delicate mauve tints.

Next day our tents were pitched among the tall grass, on the banks of the Rud-i-Seïstan[1]; their white silhouettes were reflected in the deep clear water, and I could not tire of admiring that picture that might be said to be drawn for the delight of the eye. It was the peaceful evening hour, the hour when you chat around the fires listening to stories of the hunt or old legends. The air is full of the light perfume of numberless tamarisks. There is as if a hush of meditation on all things, and when the conversation ceases you hear nothing but the dull murmur of the river, and the monotonous chirp of the cricket.

The following day, as soon as the sun had warmed the atmosphere, we left the camp with guns in our hands. It had been decided that we should go as far as the banks of the Hilmend, only a few kilometres distant to beat the shrubs, where, it seemed, there

[1] An arm of the Hilmend which gives wealth and life to the whole region as far as Nasretabad.

A CORNER OF THE RAMPARTS OF THE RUINED TOWN OF ZAHIDAN

ON THE BANKS OF THE HILMEND—GROUP OF SEÏSTAN PEASANTS GOING TO REPAIR THE "BEND"

were legions of young partridges. In fact, we had barely gone a hundred paces outside the camp when the first shot was fired, followed by many others; it was a general fusillade for an hour. The game was a kind of brown partridge with a black head; the dogs were replaced by young Baluchi, as nimble as hares and quick as lightning.

We soon after reached the ruined fort of Kuhak, built on a mount, overlooking at a short distance the river Hilmend and Afghan territory. That fort, which is said to have been abandoned for two centuries, is one of the best preserved I have seen in Seïstan: with its corner towers broadened at the base, its loopholes, its battlements, its interior round track, it bore an astonishing resemblance to our strong castles in the Middle Ages. From the top the view was marvellous; in the foreground lay the plain covered with tall dark-coloured grass, then the long silver streak of the Hilmend rolling the volume of its waters from south to north, and shut off just in front of us by the dam famous in the history of the country, and called *Bend-i-Seïstan*. More than 150 metres long by 15 to 20 wide, it is composed of fascines held in place by stakes. A very feeble volume of water passes through, and you can easily understand that the Afghans living on its banks, who happen to live lower down, complain bitterly of this construction which dries up their river.

We could not resist the desire to set foot on Afghan

territory, and crossing the Hilmend on fascines—to the great consternation of a few anglers—we shook off the dust of our boots on the dominions of the Ameer of Kabul.

Two boats that could be taken to pieces, and belonged to our camp, came alongside the dam, and we reached, with the swiftness of an arrow, our little canvas village over which the British flag was flying. During our absence a courier had arrived from Nasretabad ; he brought a telegram from the English minister at Teheran to the following effect : " Shah seized by inflammation of the heart, will not live the night." This sad news cast a shadow over our perfect tranquillity. Beyond the fact that it was painful for me to learn the approaching end of that Emperor who was a friend of France, and who was so kind to me, I was thinking of the agitation which that death could not fail to bring to the country. Now I had already lived at Yunnan in Manchuria during very troublous times, and I knew what few facilities for travelling revolutions gave.

*December 16th.* In the radiant light of a spring morning, our camp awoke, bustled about, and got ready for departure. Hurriedly we left the tents which had to be taken down and loaded on the camels in order that they should be ready before twilight to receive us that evening in the village of Djezinak.

The two boats were there waiting for us ; with them we were to descend the Rud-i-Seïstan, while the

INTERIOR OF THE ABANDONED FORT OF KUHAK

caravan would go directly to the point where they would halt. On the banks, covered with tamarisks and reeds, we saw oxen, asses, and children looking on with astonishment. They were not, in fact, accustomed to see boats navigating their river, for the only mode of river locomotion used by the people of Seïstan is a sort of raft called *tooteen*, made of branches tied together, of which the prow is shaped like a swan's neck. We passed by several villages, built for the most part on an eminence which protects them from floods; their small houses with cupola-shaped roofs, their old towers, were reflected in the waters of the Rud, and thus passed before our eyes in a multitude of charming pictures. What an agreeable change this river navigation made compared with the long trots on camels' backs through the black pebbles of the Baluchi desert!

We passed the old fort of Kemak, then the mazar of Atashga, perched on the summit of a hill that was quite white. Further on the river spread out among marshes covered with reeds inhabited, it seemed, by innumerable colonies of ducks. We were already rejoicing at the thought of an approaching hecatomb, when suddenly the wind rose, a wild wind which raised clouds of sand, and nearly overthrew our frail barks.

It was necessary to land as quickly as possible, and seek a shelter behind a little sand hill which was fortunately within reach. In that way for a whole hour we watched the tempest raging. Then suddenly

and inexplicably the wind dropped, the dark horizon cleared, and we resumed in bright sunshine our interrupted journey.

After we crossed the lakes our boats entered a narrow channel bordered by high dunes; but the guide signalled to stop, we had reached the end of our voyage on the Rud-i-Seïstan, and we then proceeded on foot over endless hills of moving sand, towards the little village of Djezinak, where the camp is to be pitched. Nothing, however, was ready when we arrived; the camels, delayed through having to cross thousands of irrigation canals, were still far, and we waited for them patiently, admiring the transparence and wondrous beauty of a blue sky, the dark blue of the rarest turquoise gems.

Scarcely had the sun disappeared in the west, when the storm returned still more violently than in the day time; it carried off, dispersed everything, and our men, obliged to struggle without ceasing, had the greatest difficulty in putting up the tents. Hour by hour the inauspicious wind increased its strength; it raged, throwing up on our frail dwellings showers of small pebbles which, striking repeatedly on the canvas, made a noise like the beating of a drum. The tents themselves were lifted up, they flapped, making the pegs creak and, lying on my camp bed, I was expecting the moment when, freed from its moorings, my canvas shelter would rise heavenwards like a balloon, and leave me defenceless at the mercy of the gale. It

was a night of terror and anxious expectancy, a real nightmare in which, during the infrequent lulls, you could hear the lugubrious wails of the camels which in their fright, were trying to break their fetters.

In the morning we were still standing after a fashion, but most of the cords now being broken were swaying in a lamentable way in the cold wind which blew sharper, colder, and wilder than the evening before. My bed and clothes were buried in a thick covering of sand: outside nothing was visible a dozen paces away. What had become of our horses and beasts of burden? It was useless to think of starting; the only thing to be done was to seek a refuge in one of the houses in the village. Unfortunately, the interpreter, who had been sent as our ambassador, came back dejectedly: all the inhabitants, it appeared, were married, and consequently could not admit a stranger under their roof.

After much palavering, they decided to offer us a ruined caravansary where we settled down pell-mell as best we could with our men. We breakfasted shivering; but the tempest did not cease, and the natives asserted that it would last seven days. It was, therefore, better to try to return to Nasretabad, only eighteen kilometres distant. At midday, therefore, wrapped up as well as possible, and marching in the tracks of the horses which we used both as guides and as protection from the wind, we braved the gale. That departure was a dismal one; we advanced with

difficulty, our bodies bent in two, our eyes barely open, sheltering ourselves as much as possible from the sand which beat against our faces, and made us suffer acutely.

Gradually, however, the dust diminished, the strange yellow fog dispersed, and it was possible for us to get on horseback. We had been struggling constantly against the storm for two long hours since we left Djezinak. When a few minutes afterwards, we halted completely exhausted in the shelter of an immense ruin, we no longer looked like human beings ; a uniformly gray layer covered us from head to foot, and made us unrecognizable. It was a trying moment we had to spend ; but Nasretabad was near, the guide said.

About four o'clock, in fact, we reached the capital quite pleased to find ourselves at last in front of a bright fire, crackling and blazing. The genial warmth of the home seemed delicious after such an effort, and when we were quite rested we thought of our unfortunate servants, who were perhaps still looking for the camels that had been dispersed that morning by the hurricane.

*December 19th.* This was the festival of the Russian Emperor's name day ; consequently, having put on my dress coat in the morning, I went with Zabieha to pay my respects, as was customary, to the Tzar's representative.

The Russian consulate had hoisted all its colours ;

THE FORT AND VILLAGE OF KEMAK ON THE BANKS OF THE RUD-I-SEÏSTAN

THE STEEP BANKS OF THE RUD-I-SEÏSTAN COVERED WITH TAMARISK AND REEDS

on all sides, over the white cupolas, tricolour flags were flapping in the wind, and as soon as we entered we were welcomed by the music of a military Persian band, lent by the governor. A few unclean wretches, in tattered uniforms, were blowing frantically into battered trombones, while others were wildly waving their arms round the big drum and the tambourine. The booths in a fair have never invented anything wilder, but we must remember that we were in Seïstan, and that a band, even if acrobatic, is there a very great luxury.

The next day, which was spent in talks and walks through the village streets, the wind began to blow a hurricane, and we were much afraid it would be necessary to abandon the arranged excursion to the holym ountain.

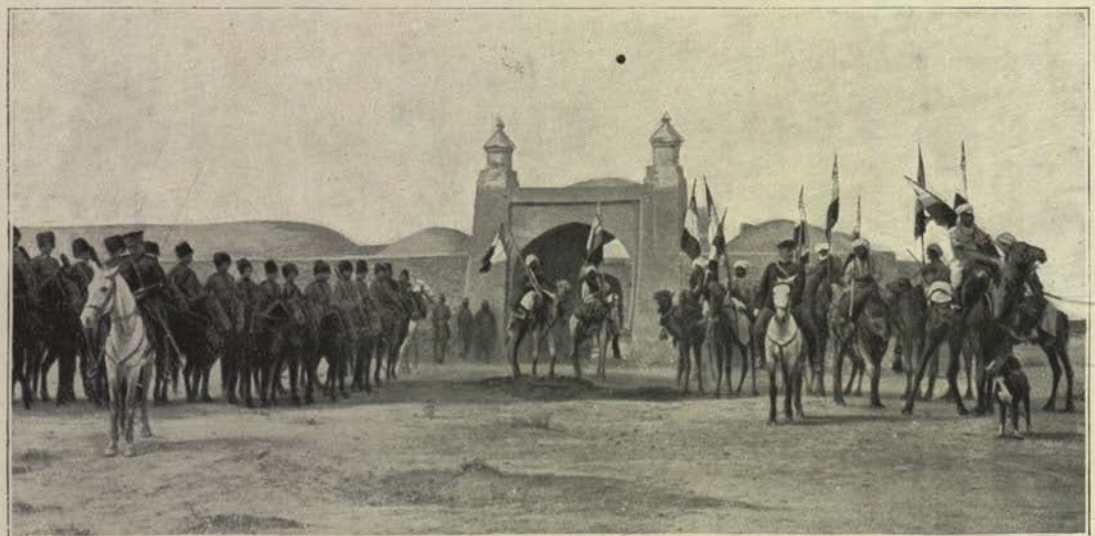
Happily, the gods were propitious; and it was in a pure sky, and a breeze so slight that we scarcely felt it, that we started for the Koh-i-Kuadja on the 21st of December. And soon there appeared in front of us, calling forth our surprise and admiration, that colossal table of basalt, which at that season rose like an island from the brackish waters of the Naizar. Thanks to the calmness of the water, we were able to go round it, and for a moment set foot on that enigmatical spot peopled by the strangest legends.

*December 25th.* It was the turn of the British consulate to have all its colours flying. It being

Christmas Day, Captain Dawkes received officially all the rulers and magistrates in the country, and we saw once more the procession we had admired among the Russians a few days before, with the same pomp, except the military band, which had not been requisitioned. It was replaced by an enormous gramophone; and during those last hours spent under a friendly roof, the gaily resounding notes of French songs awoke in us something of an echo of the mother country still far away.

Frank and cordial hospitality, sincere welcomes, delicate attentions, nothing was missing during our stay at Nasretabad, and we took away with us a charming remembrance of it. Yet the amiable courtesy of our hosts was not satisfied with so much kindness. On our way towards Meshed we were escorted by horsemen from their personal guards, and we left with two Cossacks, and two Hindoo lancers in our suite. Thus, for the first time in that corner of Persia, the soldiers of Russia and Great Britain marched side by side in the same caravan.

*December 26th.* The mule-drivers were ready early, and we started, accompanied by Captain Dawkes and his Sowars, by M. Nekrassof and his Cossacks, and preceded by a troop of camel-drivers bearing big French and Russian flags. In short, we went to the first stopping place of our stage—the village of Afzelabad—amid an extraordinary fantasia; and when the last hand-shake was exchanged, amid the



WE LEAVE NASRETABAD WITH A BRILLIANT ESCORT OF COSSACKS AND PRECEDED BY CAMEL-DRIVERS CARRYING LARGE FRENCH AND RUSSIAN FLAGS

hurrahs of the Cossacks, all those friends departed, and with them life and good-humour.

In the plain, the noise of voices gradually died away: the animated group was now nothing more than a dark imperceptible point, then all vanished, silence took possession, and we were left alone, Zabieha and myself, on the threshold of a new desert, in presence of a disquieting and impenetrable unknown.

There was something comical in the picturesqueness of our caravan. It was no longer—through the rose gardens of Naizar—the slow procession of nomads we had already seen, it was the whimsical removal of the company of a travelling circus, going to give a performance in some neighbouring village. At the head marched the two Cossacks, flanked by Djuma-Khan, the "Ferash" of the Russian consulate, and by Rahim-Berdi, a Turkoman from Merv, who had come from Transcaspia in consequence of some unimportant assassination. We followed this first group at the trotting pace of our ponies, while in the rear came the line, long drawn out, of the pack-mules, among which shone the red gold-braided tunic of a rich Afghan going to Meshed, who had placed himself and his wealth under our protection. A wretched caravan of donkeys, whose owners had likewise put themselves under our ægis, were trotting painfully in the rear guard, escorted by the two Hindoo lancers, who were in charge of the convoy.

We marched all day under a burning sun, among

tall reeds, so high as to shut out the view. The track, barely visible, followed a ridge, from which the waters had recently withdrawn, and in a clayey ground that was still wet our poor animals stumbled, stuck, and advanced only slowly. To the right and left shone the liquid expanse, in which thousands of ducks and teals disported themselves among the reeds; geese, gulls, herons constantly darted across the blue sky in their flight, but, alas, so high as to be out of reach; and southwards we saw the dark outline of the Koh-i-Kuadja.

At the moment when the sun was about to disappear behind the rocky mountains of the Palan-Koh, casting as if a carnival mist over the quiet waters of the great lakes, we arrived in front of the caravansary of Labi-Bering, the white cupolas of which are also coloured with the deliciously rosy tint with which the whole landscape is suffused.

At this point, we were compelled to stay two days in order to spend five times twenty-four hours between our departure from Nasretabad and our arrival at Bandan, the quarantine station; for such were the regulations which had been promulgated nearly a year before at the time when the plague reigned in Seïstan.

*December 30th.* Behind the cupolas, the dawn slashed the sky with long blood-red streaks when we got on horseback. The mules had started before dawn; they formed a dark spot on the steps of the

DJUMA-KHAN AND ONE OF OUR COSSACKS ON THE ROOF OF A HOUSE AT BIRJAND

grand stone staircase which we were going to climb behind them. In fact, the road now left the Naizar depression, and rose upwards and upwards, through dismal and uniformly gray expanses, without a blade of green grass, without a drop of water. A difficult stage that ride of sixty kilometres among the small white and black pebbles which rolled at every step under the feet of our animals.

It was late when we at last reached the ancient fortress of Bandan ; it was the moment when the bread was about to be baked in the argile cones, and on all sides tall bright flames whirled upwards to the sky, and cast on the walls close by something like the glare of a conflagration. The women, dressed in red, were chatting in picturesque groups round each fire, and one would have said a gathering of witches assembled for some fantastic sabbat.

The palm-grove of Bandan, situated at the bottom of a narrow gorge is the gate of Seïstan northwards ; on the other side of a rocky passage began the territories of the Kaïnat. We crossed that pass, which was obstructed by enormous blocks of granite, on the 31st of December about midday, and going down the line of greatest declivity of an immense glacis that was entirely desert-like, we reached early the well called Ali-Abad.

It was in the only house, half-demolished, of that abandoned oasis, in a room exposed to every wind, that we spent the last night of 1906. We had, however,

respect for the old traditions, and were anxious to celebrate the new year as we formerly did in the bosom of our families. But how was it to be done? We had neither stuffed turkeys nor Strasburg pies. Just then Zabieha discovered in the bottom of a canteen a last bottle of champagne, and we drank gaily to France, to the friends we left there, to the happy issue of the journey.

*January 1st.* Our caravan marched all that day across a yellow desert with long undulations. Here and there rose from that ocean of pebbles rocky islets, slender crests of dark granite; one would have said they were the dorsal fins of some gigantic fish that had been petrified there in the early ages of the world.

The sun was setting in a shower of gold dust when we arrived at the first houses in Neh, the objective of our stage. Djuma-Khan, who knew the cantonments on the way, brought us to the Custom-house where we were amiably received by the native functionaries. That evening we had a room all whitened with fresh lime, and provisions in abundance.

We had now each day to ride through a desert country which bore a striking resemblance to the plains of the Baluchi country, with its dried-up rivers and its stunted shrubs scorched by the sun. Now the ground was entirely flat, strewn with black and white pebbles; now it was undulating like the surface of a sea disturbed by a great swell. Every

PALACE OF THE AMEER OF KAÏNAT, NEAR BIRJAND

RETURNING IN THE SNOW IN THE MOUNTAINS OF TORBET-I-HEIDARI

evening we found shelter in a wretched village, but very often the water in it was brackish, and we were then obliged to carry leather bottles filled with water for two or three days.

Passing Soosp, Sahalabad, Ser-Bisheh,[1] Mood, we reached Birjand on the evening of the 7th January.

There we entered into immediate dealings with the authorities; on the very first day at the Russian consulate where we stayed there was a continual procession of gentlemen in ceremonial attire; the head of the post-office, the colonel in charge of the telegraph, the karguzar,[2] the two native doctors, and to end the series, the mustaphi—the governor's *aide de camp*—who brought us from his master a string of presents.[3]

In exchange, the Ameer begged for the favour of a visit, and that was not the funniest part of it. We had, however, to make the best of our ill-luck, and next day, in the landau belonging to His Excellency, we were galloping at a frantic pace towards the princely castle. Shanket-el-Mulk (Glory of the Land) is a man of about twenty-five, with a distinguished and aristocratic bearing; his welcome was of the

[1] It was at Ser-Bisheh that winter overtook us. During the two nights we spent in this village the thermometer fell to – 10°C.

[2] Functionary who deals with consuls.

[3] I cannot resist the pleasure of giving a list of these magnificent presents. Here it is in all its simplicity: two sheep, five chickens, one jar of butter, two bags of rice, one bale of tea, eight loaves of sugar, and ten trays of confectionery.

simplest and most amiable kind. Of much culture, he seemed to have a special liking for French literature represented in Persia by the translation of the following two works alone :—" La Dame aux Camélias " and " Les Trois Mousquetaires."

About four o'clock we were able at length to be free, and in the quiet calm of the evening we had an exquisite walk through the innumerable little alleys of the town, all very picturesque and curious.

*January 10th.* The Shah, Muzaffaru'ddin, died yesterday in his palace at Teheran : a confidential telegram addressed to the Ameer brought last night the news which would only be communicated to the people later.

Meanwhile, the hour of our departure was near ; a rapid inspection of the caravan had to be made ; no one was absent at the roll-call, both those on horseback and on foot were at their post. I only noted that our little band was increased by two units. Doctor Fath-Ali-Khan and his faithful servant—a prince of the blood fallen on evil days—were henceforth to form part of the " circus." They would represent wonderfully well Don Quixote, and Sancho Panza. A cordial hand-shake to our host, a final bow to the authorities of the place, and we were off to Torbet-i-Heidari, where we arrived without serious mishap after eleven long days' march.

Bright suns, blue skies, and easy stages were ended. Henceforth we should have to struggle constantly

against a hurricane lashing our faces and penetrating our furs, against a biting cold which at times brought the thermometer to 20°C below zero. The thought that Meshed was near, that the goal that had so long been aimed at was soon to be reached, could alone help us to bear uncomplaining those last days of the journey. At last, on the 29th of January, 1907, at two o'clock in the afternoon, in a blinding snow, we re-crossed the Teheran road not far from Sherif-Abad. We had looped the loop, our intinerary was successfully completed, and our efforts through those long months found their reward in that moment of real joy, only known intensely and deeply by those who willingly undertake the risks of a nomad life with a definite object in view.

Next day, having crossed for the second time the heights of the Saughi-Best, we passed through the gates of Meshed, now all white in a shroud of snow: Meshed, the holy city, with its domes of blue and gold, which had stood before us on the 10th of May, 1906, resplendent under a burning sun. But if the religious city had become cold by contact with winter, the hearts of the good friends we left there had perserved their cordial and affable warmth. We were fêted, overwhelmed with attentions. Messrs. de Klemme and Sykes, the two consuls-general, received us with the most friendly show of welcome, and the comfortable hospitality of Mr. Molitor soon gave us back the appearance of civilised people.

Nothing more remained for us—after a week's rest—but to reach Askhabad by the route already followed, thence take the train to Kraznovodsk, and afterwards the packet to Baku. And so we did. And I can still see Zabieha and myself standing on the bridge, both silent, watching the watery track, which the vessel left behind, and which every minute separated us more and more from those solitudes we had crossed, from that Afghanistan we had just gone round, after so many victorious struggles and efforts crowned with success.

A year before I had found in Zabieha a travelling companion, shrewd, jovial, easy to live with, with a perfect knowledge of the desert and its resources; at Baku I left a devoted coadjutor, a rare and regretted friend, to whom I owed in a great measure the success of my journey, and whom I shall be delighted to find again if, at a future time, I am tempted to undertake some fresh adventure.

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